PLAYSTATION 20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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TWENTY YEARS OF PLAYSTATION
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star citizen

CAN CHRIS ROBERTS' COLOSSAL RETURN TO GAMES WIN THE SPACE RACE?

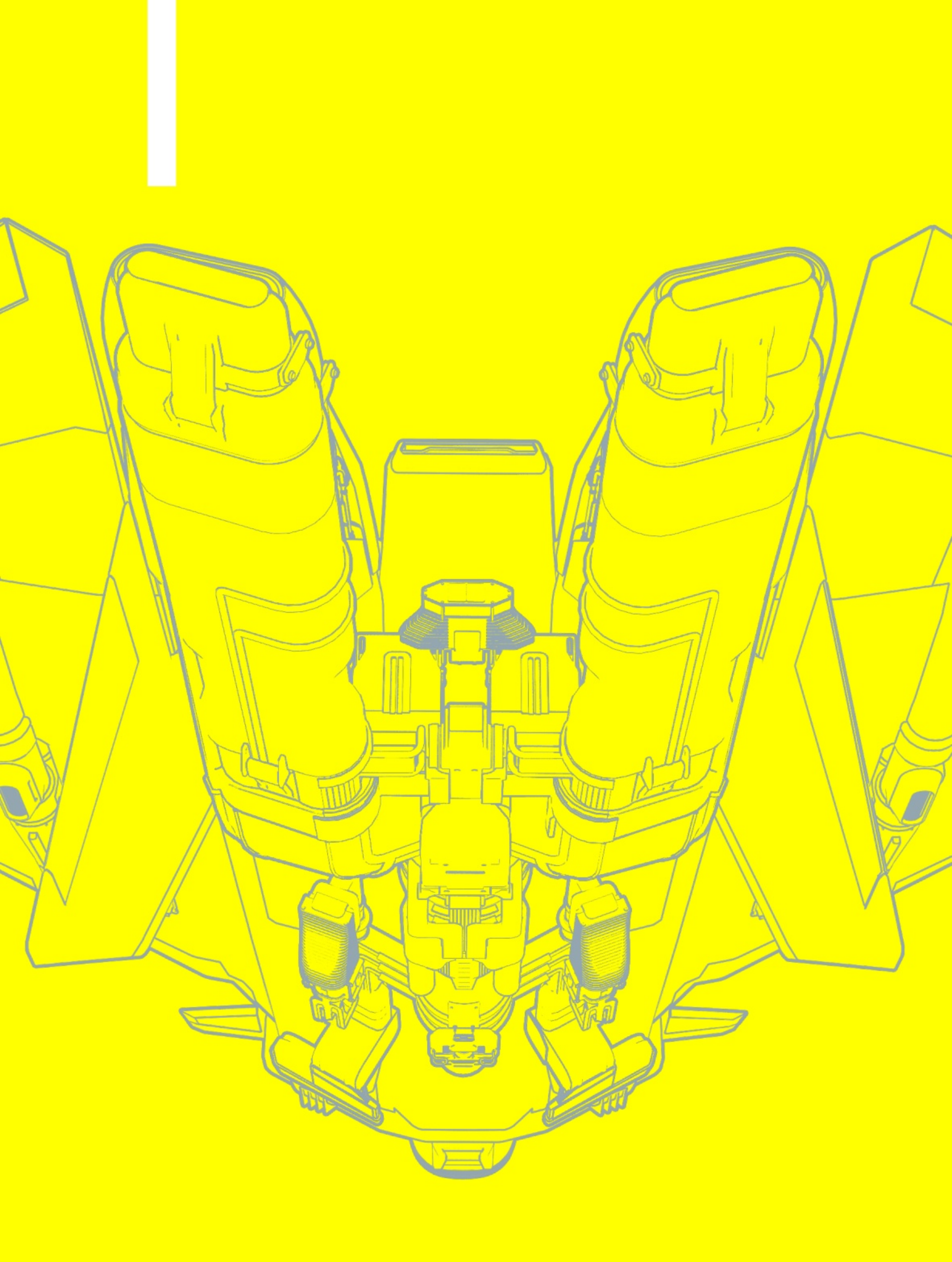
REVIEWED
CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE
LITTLEBIGPLANET 3
SUNSET OVERDRIVE
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#274
CHRISTMAS 2014

PLAYSTATION TV ON TEST

THE MAKING OF NO MORE HEROES



Views from the launchpad



"We do recognise Sony as a major player. It's just that we're confident that we know videogames better than anyone, and we feel supremely confident that at every technical turn the Ultra 64 is a superior machine to the PlayStation, and will offer a greater gaming experience." When **Peter Main**, who for 15 years served as Nintendo Of America's executive VP of sales and marketing, said this in late 1994, Sony's PlayStation had only just been released into the world, and even then only to the Japanese market. While attempting to brush Sony's offering aside, in reality the statement revealed how seriously the game industry's established players were taking this new competition. An aspiring rival that supposedly falls so far short of the mark isn't even worth the recognition of discussion in public. Only legitimate threats deserve that kind of attention.

Outside of Nintendo, others were more generous with their appraisals of Sony's work, while also offering their own warnings. "The PlayStation is very strong, but Sony has absolutely no experience in this market, and the games market really is like no other," Atari's **Darryl Still** declared. "You can't just come in and buy market share. You have to build it."

And build it Sony famously did. In this issue, 20 years on, we look at what the company's fresh perspective brought to the game industry, via firstperson accounts from people who were there at the time. It's our biggest feature of the year, reflecting the size of the impact PlayStation had on players, on game development, and on Sony's competitors.

Competition is one of the crucial factors keeping the videogame industry moving forward, which brings us to our cover story. If you've been paying attention, you'll have seen *Elite: Dangerous* on the cover of **E**264 and *No Man's Sky* heading up **E**270, so it should feel appropriate that we complete the trilogy with *Star Citizen* this issue. In our lead feature, we talk to developer Cloud Imperium about its own spin on deep-space adventure.



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Specialist Magazine Of The Year

A TV model in need of tuning

The launch of PlayStation TV and ongoing DriveClub issues reveal some old problems lingering at Sony

For its Japanese release last year, it was branded as PS Vita TV, and no wonder. What arrives in the west bearing the more massmarket name PlayStation TV is clearly a Vita in slender clothing, with the same OS, menus and Home screen music. Yet where Vita itself is large by handheld standards – more showy hardware design from a company famous for it – PSTV is almost amusingly small. Measuring a mere 6x10cm, it's just tall enough for the rear to accommodate an Ethernet cable, an HDMI cable, USB drive and Vita memory card, plus the power supply. On the side sits a slot for card-based Vita games. It was the headline feature for a device that launched in Japan four months before PS4, but PSTV's role in the west is very different. The £85 device forms a third pillar of Sony's gaming strategy that, on paper at least, is ripe with potential: a low-cost My First PlayStation that launches with a vast library of games from across Sony's two decades in the videogame business.

On a big screen, games are cut back from their full splendour, capped at 720p and 30 frames per second

Announced as a PS4 launch title, *DriveClub* hit shelves last month with networking issues that rendered its social features unusable



Currently, the big selling point is Remote Play, allowing streaming of PS4 games over a local network or the Internet. It's never been perfect, but its flaws have been easier to forgive given the thrill of playing a PS3 game on the move, using a device with an OLED screen that does a fine job of tidying up variable video data. On PSTV, things are different: you're playing on a big screen, albeit one in the bedroom, and games are cut back from their full splendour, capped at 720p and 30 frames per second. In our tests, even with both PS4 and PSTV wired into a home network as per Sony's recommendation, enough input latency was introduced to render *Destiny* and *Sleeping Dogs: Definitive Edition* uncomfortable, if not unplayable, with artefacting sullying busier moments. Our hopes that things would improve when running a less graphically intensive game were dashed when *Rogue Legacy* performed similarly.

Luckily, a Cross Play-enabled Vita version of that game exists, and when thought of as a Vita with HDMI out and support for DualShocks 3 and 4, PSTV makes more sense. The system upscales from Vita's 960x544 resolution to a maximum of 1080i, and while the scaler isn't best in class, it doesn't diminish the satisfaction of playing on an HDTV and a sofa games designed for a five-inch screen. The thought of continuing the commute's *Persona 4 Golden* run on the big screen of an evening is an enticing one, as is playing a game ill-suited to Vita's small screen and analogue sticks – a shooter, say – on a bigger display and with a DualShock in your hands.

If only we could. *Persona 4 Golden* was one of the few games that actually ran during our test, with PSTV's lack of touchscreen support sounding the death knell for a chunk of the Vita catalogue. While we didn't expect to be able to play *Tearaway* and other games built around Vita's swollen featureset, nor did we expect error messages when trying to load firstparty big-hitters such as *Gravity Rush* or *Uncharted: Golden Abyss*.

Even games that use the touchscreen in superfluous, optional ways fall foul of this limitation. If you want to play *Lumines: Electronic Symphony* or *Everybody's Golf: World Tour*, you're out of luck. *Street Fighter X Tekken*, which lets you map special-move inputs and button combos to quadrants of the front touchscreen and rear panel, but is perfectly playable with traditional sticks and buttons, is another that simply refuses to load. While some newer games have been made functional by patches, older games have been ignored. Of the 11 games available at Vita's UK launch in February 2012, only one, Evolution Studios' *MotorStorm RC*, works. Six of the current top ten sellers on Amazon are supported, which still doesn't feel like enough. Fortunately, Sony has secured support for what might be the only game that matters.

PSTV's potential as a *Minecraft* box could be critical. It is the most popular game going with the demographic at which PSTV is aimed, and at under £100 for the system and a download copy of the game, it offers the cheapest route ▶



PlayStation TV arrived in the UK on November 14. It's £85 and bundled with download codes for ***OlliOlli***, ***Velocity Ultra*** and ***Worms Revolution Extreme***. For all its faults, the device may get a boost when the PlayStation Now streaming service launches

FAST FRIENDS
While Sony's lax attitude to PS4 firmware updates compared to its rival can be given a positive spin by pointing out that there was much more that needed fixing in Xbox One's launch dashboard, by the time PS4 system software 2.0 arrived, the system's OS was beginning to struggle. Friends lists and new messages could take a couple of minutes to load in, and it was pleasing to see that the October firmware update sped things up a little in addition to bringing new features such as YouTube uploads and Share Play's virtual local multiplayer. Much work remains to be done, however, particularly on how games are arranged on the main menu. That horizontally scrolling list has become rather bulky to navigate as PS4's library has grown, and Sony's latest solution – having 15 recently used items on the Home screen, with everything else in the Library submenu – doesn't quite cut it.

to full-fat *Minecraft* on the market. With that in mind, it's staggering that the two haven't been bundled together for launch; the £85 bundle comes with download codes for *OlliOlli*, *Velocity Ultra* and, for reasons that presumably made sense to somebody along the line, *Worms Revolution Extreme*. A *Minecraft* bundle has to follow at some point – at least assuming that Microsoft, Mojang's new owner, has been honest in its promise not to block the game from appearing on other platforms – but having one on shelves for Christmas could have made all the difference.

Yet regardless of compatibility issues, PSTV's support for PS1, PSP and PS Mini releases means it launches with a library of some 700 games, giving it a clear competitive advantage over other set-top boxes. That, it turns out, is just as well given how far PSTV lags behind the likes of Apple TV, Chromecast and Amazon's Fire TV as a media box. While a Netflix app was on the PlayStation Store when Vita launched in North America almost three years ago, it has never made it to Europe. As such, PSTV launches in the UK with no support for the world's most popular subscription video service. Amazon Instant Video, BBC iPlayer, YouTube and Now TV – all, like Netflix, available in app form on PS3 and PS4 – are absent from the PSTV store. Bafflingly, you're even forbidden from accessing the PS4 versions of the apps over Remote Play, the system throwing up an error message and then booting you unceremoniously back to the PS4 Home menu.

It's all a bit confusing. Set-top boxes should be simple to set up and easy to use. While PSTV's setup is straightforward enough, the problems begin the minute you sit back and start using the thing. It is an irresistible idea in theory, and a fine bit of industrial design too, but it is blemished by substandard software support. It is, in that sense, a perfect metaphor for the current state of Sony.

After Microsoft spent most of 2013 leaving its goal untended and gently ushering Sony towards it, the latter half of 2014 has been very different.



PlayStation TV's slender, 6x10cm form factor is just big enough for all the necessary ports on its rear. The power button ❶ can be ignored once you've synced a DualShock 3 or 4 to the device, since it can be woken from standby by pressing the controller's PlayStation button. Next to it are ports for a Vita memory card ❷, USB drive ❸, HDMI cable ❹, Ethernet cable ❺ and power supply ❻. A flap on the side of the device conceals a slot for PlayStation Vita game cards, and the device also has 1GB of onboard storage to hold your game and media downloads.

DriveClub, the game Sony used to dull the pain of charging for online multiplayer on PS4 by offering a cut-down version of the title to PS Plus subscribers, has endured a disastrous launch. The only thing saving it from reaching *Sim City* and *Diablo III* levels of shame is the fact that it can still be played in singleplayer when the servers are down. However, at the time of writing, the game has been on shelves for almost a month and it remains an almost entirely offline pursuit. The long-promised *PS Plus Edition*, meanwhile, has been delayed indefinitely.

It is a sorry tale for Evolution Studios, whose supposed PS4 launch game was 11 months late onto shelves and then arrived stripped of key features by network troubles. But Sony's response – or lack of it – is the more damning part. It took three weeks for Worldwide Studios president Shuhei Yoshida to acknowledge the problem, while senior Evolution staff, who were open on social media during development, fell suddenly silent.

> There's little wrong that isn't fixable, but who, given Sony's current form, would expect it to be fixed?

Sony's network problems extend far beyond *DriveClub*, however. While extended periods of PSN downtime for 'scheduled maintenance' were an inconvenience in the PS3 era, they are unforgivable now that Sony is charging for its service. Once a month, Sony takes down its £40-per-year online service for up to eight hours, taking with it always-online games like *Destiny*, the multiplayer component of many more titles and, in our experience, blocking access to digital purchases because PSN refuses the console's handshake to check for the proper licences. The network has a recurring DDOS problem – one recent attack was conducted specifically to show that Sony has not invested in improved network protection – and since *Destiny*'s launch in early September, PS4 users have had to endure five protracted periods of downtime, only one of which was planned for.

It affects PSTV, too. A bug in PS4 system software 2.0 – the console's first substantial firmware update since launch – meant its standby mode, for some reason renamed Rest mode in the update, didn't work properly, shutting the console down fully after a time, and even locking up the unit. Remote Play only works if the PS4 is in Rest mode, so our tests meant a few disconsolate trips back downstairs to turn on the machine by hand. Version 2.01 followed a week later to fix the

As a *Minecraft* box, PSTV may still entice a younger audience and those seeking a low-cost point of entry

problem, but a week is a long time to solve a system-locking bug. And none of this inspires confidence in PlayStation Now, the on-demand streaming service that in its current beta state uses exorbitant rental pricing rather than subscriptions, and which will not function at all when Sony's server infrastructure falls over.

With all this in mind, it's little surprise that a bite-sized device full of potential should launch beset with so many seemingly avoidable issues. There's little wrong with PSTV that isn't fixable, but who, given Sony's current form, would expect it to be fixed? Sony has long been excellent at hardware and poor at software solutions, and while its masterful PS4 marketing convinced millions of players that the company had changed, apparently behind the scenes still lurks a litany of ancient problems. Microsoft, meanwhile, updates the Xbox One interface once a month, has cleared out much of the executive deadwood that almost ruined the console before it had even launched, and has started making all the right noises to its audience. Sony's latest fiscal update boasted of "a significant increase in network services revenue related to the introduction of the PS4". It is time to start spending it on shoring up the services that raised that revenue, and quickly. ■





Given how *Tearaway* (above) uses Vita's touch, tilt, cameras and microphone, we didn't ever expect it to run on PSTV, but *Street Fighter X Tekken* failing to work was an unpleasant surprise. The same holds for a number of other games with limited touchscreen dependance. Patches may be forthcoming, but it's something of a lottery as to which titles are supported

PATCH 'EM ALL

Some Vita games run better than others on PSTV



Not all Vita games are upscaled from the handheld's native 960x544 to match the resolution of your HDTV's display. Some, including *Killzone: Mercenary* and the Vita port of *Borderlands 2*, have been updated to run in native 1080i. It's a welcome move, but a limited one, and further reinforces the perception that the device has been released before it was ready. Sony says it is working with partners to get more Vita games up and running, and on securing media apps such as Netflix too, but PlayStation TV is hard to recommend until those discussions bear fruit, especially to those who already own both a Vita and PS4.

Heavenly creatures

Why Ninja Theory is treating Hellblade's development as a new era for the studio

The past 18 months have involved a lot of soul searching for Ninja Theory. In *Heavenly Sword* and *Enslaved: Odyssey To The West*, the studio has worked with worlds that it's desperate to revisit. But with no offers from its publishers to do so, and with work on *DmC: Devil May Cry* drawing to a close as well, last year the studio decided to create new IP instead.

Multiple pitches were constructed and rejected. A horror game created in tandem with 28 Days Later screenwriter Alex Garland was dismissed because the horror genre "wasn't popular enough". A contemporary co-op and story-based title, again in partnership with Garland, was also turned down, though not before it was suggested the grounded characters were swapped out for soldiers on Mars in order to make it more palatable.

"The only way to design a product for the new platforms seemed to be to focus on the things that sell and then replicate them," explains studio co-founder **Tameem Antoniades**. "Which isn't then a creative endeavour, it's hard graft."

For a successful pitch in today's climate, Antoniades believes publishers need to guarantee sales of "about four or five million" – numbers that don't match up with the projected sales of the games Ninja Theory wants to build. And it's for this reason that its new game, *Hellblade*, has three important words cut into its reveal trailer: an independent game.

"*Hellblade* is about us creating something that's ours," Antoniades says. "We can steer it into the future, be its protector and shepherd it. *Hellblade* is not funded by our other projects. We're putting mostly our own money into this."

"Hellblade is not funded by our other projects. We're putting mostly our own money into this"

Development began in March, and self-funding meant going from a team size of over 80 to just 13 people, though two other concurrent projects mitigated the need to downsize the studio.

"We have traditionally created a lot of bespoke content and a lot of set-pieces in our games," says **Dominic Matthews**, product development manager. "The challenge for us with a smaller team is working in a smarter way. Our approach to this game is to get as much value out of the people that we've got."

For instance, the game's sole environment artist has been given the freedom to create the world before any other mechanics have been finalised; in the past, environments were always created to serve a fixed script. And if sensible opportunities to recycle work arise, such as rolling creature animation into the environment's general malevolence, it helps the artist build an even richer world without extra effort.

"Every [enemy] does attack moves," says technical art director **Stuart Adcock**. "If we can take certain frames from an attack move and stitch them together, we can make interesting sculptures for the world that feel quite hellish by reusing some of the work effort that we've put in."

One core area of cost-saving is a new approach to performance capture. "It's an incredibly expensive thing to do, but you get incredible quality out of doing it," says Matthews. "We're currently in the process of thinking, 'How do we do this? How do we get the same results but without the huge expenditure?'"

Homebrew appears to be the answer, with the studio's biggest meeting room



Tameem Antoniades, co-founder of Ninja Theory, also serves as the chief creative director for *Hellblade*

converted into a makeshift capture area full of GoPro cameras, phones and Ikea-sourced poles, with team members test running the setup while sporting self-printed sticky-backed markers.

All this experimentation is contained within the *Hellblade* project in the hope that success will deliver a blueprint for future titles. "If we can prove that this one works and that it can be a success, I think funding opportunities will come easier over time," says Antoniades. "Some of that might be to go to publishers like they're distributors in the same way as independent movies: they'd advance some of the money to make it, you'd put in some of your own money, and you're still in control of what happens."



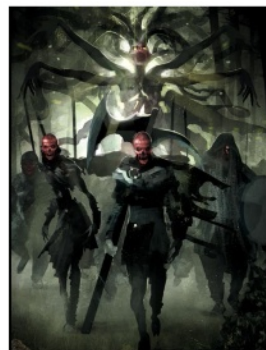
Antoniades readily admits the studio's still trying to work out the business strategy. In its latest development diary, the team asked potential fans what merchandise they want to buy to help fund development, and at GDC Europe Antoniades announced an initiative in partnership with Epic to create online classes and workshops for university students and hobbyists interested in the development process. But for Ninja Theory's co-founder, this project is a chance to cultivate a future in which he can take more creative risks – and for other studios to learn from Ninja Theory's ultimate triumph or failure.

"I want the industry to be a good place where creative studios are making good, fun games, and it's competitive and it's exciting and there's a spark to it. It's not pleasant that so many studios have gone under. It doesn't make us feel like, 'A-ha! We're standing! We're surviving!' It's a miserable landscape. You should be able to earn a decent living making good, fun things that people want." ■

While visions of combat and enemies dominate early concept art (right, main, below right), *Hellblade* will also feature geometric puzzles that ask you to assemble environmental details through camera manipulation







ACTING THE PART

Ninja Theory isn't about to drop its Hollywood contacts



On prior hardware, Ninja Theory built a reputation by partnering with the likes of Alex Garland and Andy Serkis. Despite *Hellblade*'s budget, product development manager Dominic Matthews is confident the trend can continue. "We're looking at this like independent film," he explains. "Certain movies have become big successes on smaller budgets, and there's talent out there that wants to work on those projects because it's a change from big blockbuster work. We offer something attractive to [that] talent, because when we work with someone we work with them very closely, and give them free rein."





Matthews claims *Hellblade* wouldn't exist if not for a recent shift in platform holders' approach to digital titles: "Five years ago, those doors just weren't open to us." As it stands, the game has to sell between 200,000 and 300,000 copies in order to earn back its development budget

Farming for gold

How Giants Software is bringing PC cult hit Farming Simulator to consoles

Some of Steam's most surprising statistics come not from the likes of *Dota 2*, *Skyrim* or *PlanetSide 2*, but *Farming Simulator 2013*. At the time of writing it boasts more active players than *Alien: Isolation*, has a higher peak player count than *Final Fantasy XIII*, and enjoys some 2,400 positive player reviews to just 167 negative ones, several of which are apparently confused about what the game set out to achieve.

Farming Simulator is, however, just part of a surge of seemingly mundane simulations over recent years, including the likes of *Euro Truck Simulator*, *Ski Region Simulator*, and *Warehouse And Logistics Simulator* (complete with the unforgettably named DLC *Hell's Warehouse*). Many have proven surprisingly popular, with *Euro Truck Simulator 2* in particular finding a sizeable niche thanks to the effort put into simulating the freedom of the open road.

But Giants Software's *Farming Simulator 15* will be the first to try to break into the current console generation, jumping from PC to both PS4 and Xbox One in 2015. "There aren't many simulation games on the consoles, so there are a lot of mixed opinions about whether it will be successful or not," Giants CEO **Christian Ammann** admits. "We have our own approach to simulation games. We tried to shake out the dust that is in this genre from the very technical, heavy simulations like *Flight Simulator*. Our approach was to make it far more accessible."

Perhaps Giant's timing couldn't be better. After all, *Minecraft* has shown that you can put a price on player creativity, and that price is two-and-a-half billion dollars. Games such as *Animal Crossing*, *Harvest Moon* and *FarmVille* show there's an enduring appetite for light life and livestock management, but genre fans can also come from unexpected corners. The response to *World Of Warcraft*'s optional farm in the *Mists Of Pandaria* expansion led to Blizzard devoting a chunk of *Warlords Of Draenor* to something similar – albeit in the form of a military garrison.

"We see quite a lot of different players, so we have the hardcore fans, some of whom are really farmers. Others are kids; we have a lot of kids playing with their parents," Ammann says. "And we've got really core gamers who play *Call Of Duty* and *Battlefield* as well, who just like playing *Farming Simulator* at some points because it's relaxing."

> "In the end, we don't have to compete. We have our own dimension, like Minecraft has"

That audience puts Giants in a tricky position when it comes to realism. Even CTO **Stefan Geiger** agrees it can be hard sell: "The first time you hear it, you think, well, 'Farming? Nah.'" So much of the work that goes into the game is about cutting to the appeal of the job, and not being too restricted by details. "I'd say that one of the benefits of the games is to achieve things faster than in the real world. It's important that it's quicker."

"For some, it's super-unrealistic what we do, and for others it's super-realistic, and it always depends on what you want to compare," Ammann says. "If you compare *Farming Simulator* to *FarmVille*, sure, it's super-realistic. But if you compare it to the real world, it's still simplified. Growing a field takes half a year: that's something we have to speed up."



Christian Ammann, CEO, Giants Software

BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY

There's no more demanding audience for any simulator than the people who do the job for real, and Giants has no shortage of farmers who get home from a long day and relax by playing *Farming Simulator*. They're not, however, its core audience. "We have a lot, but in the end it's the same as with professional pilots and *Flight Simulator*," says Ammann. "They're important, and they are also the guys who give us the feedback for the improvements for new versions and addon content, but they're not a big enough audience to sell a game to." This doesn't necessarily mean a casual fanbase, though – over 33 per cent of players have clocked up over ten hours in a single savegame according to Steam stats, and for many that's just a start. "Sometimes it's scary how much people play," says Ammann. "One guy had an accumulated time of four months just seven months after release. He must have played it all the time!"

Instead, Giants creates longevity through a career mode and tries to convey the feel of reality without ever restricting players when it comes to real life's more tedious elements. In particular, help with the latter comes from licensing, partnerships, and getting real-world vehicles into the sim, much as a racing game studio might court car makers. "With the partnership with most of those manufacturers, we get the CAD data in and can then create our realtime model and so on," Ammann says. "Working directly with them is really helpful, with sound recordings and test machines and consulting on how their machines work. Ultimately, we're not farmers here!"

Neither Xbox One nor PS4 is changing how Giants approaches the task for the moment, with the consoles' main benefit being that they allow the studio to offer parity with a decent PC, which means HD resolution and 60fps. The simulation certainly isn't being dumbed down for the new audience, with the main difference being the control scheme. This is, of course, a challenge for Giants, though the bigger one by far is being the pathfinder for its genre as a whole – a genre that is always going to find it hard to go toe-to-toe with the many better-funded releases on the market.

"Those triple-A products have 50 times the budget and the marketing, but in the end we don't have to compete. We have our own dimension, like *Minecraft* has," Ammann says, shrugging off questions of whether an audience is ready and waiting. "I think that is more a problem for gaming journalists than people out there – a lot don't understand the game and so ask why people are playing it. If you're interested in the topic, you're interested in the game." ■



The series' patchwork fields will soon be ready for Xbox One and PS4 owners to tend in a variety of vehicles, drawn from over 41 real-world brands

Fear factor

What's behind the flesh-creeping revival of Japanese horror games?

The black incantation to spawn horror games has evidently been recited once again, with a horde of genre entries shambling onto storefronts in recent months. *Alien: Isolation* and *Outlast* have explored new avenues in the west recently, but the genre's defining masters hail from Japan, and developers in the region are just as alive to the trend.

"Japanese horror games, like Japanese horror films, are not usually simply about splatter and gore," says **Keisuke Kikuchi**, producer of *Zero: Nuregarasu No Miko* (*Fatal Frame: Oracle Of The Sodden Raven*), made by Koei Tecmo and released in Japan on Wii U in September. "They place great importance on the human relationships in the background of the story, and also on the setting, such as the familiar interior of a typical Japanese home, where you might expect something to come out of the darkness. They evoke fear not just through things that are scary but also through things that are beautiful."

"Japanese games evoke fear not just through things that are scary but also through things that are beautiful"

Fatal Frame is built around the Camera Obscura, allowing the player to exorcise spirits with a well-framed snap – a mechanic intended to increase immersion, and with it the number of goose bumps. It's heightened here by using a GamePad to capture the spectres, but the game also plays on the Japanese association of water with the Other Side, making the player character stronger but also much more vulnerable when wet.

"We've tried to use water in this way before, but the improved hardware and HD graphics on Wii U allow us to express it in a much scarier way," says Kikuchi. "When the player anticipates there may be something lurking in the water, it heightens the feeling of anxiety."

PT, meanwhile, has been out for months, but **Hideo Kojima**'s first stab at survival horror was a teaser for his forthcoming reboot of Konami's *Silent Hill*, and has much to say about the series' new direction. The teaser places heavy emphasis on building atmosphere, with weapons – and indeed direct mechanics of almost any kind – replaced by a creeping sense of dread that is ramped up by expert use of disjointed music and haunting sound effects.

Even the way the game was marketed, with no information released other than the title, was an attempt by Kojima to instil in the player a suspicion of the unknown. "Nowadays, when people don't know something, they Google it," he said in a recent interview with The Japan Times. "We live in an age of information. When that suddenly disappears, that's the scariest thing."

Just as Kojima is working on *Silent Hills* with movie director Guillermo Del Toro, whose CV includes The Devil's Backbone and Pan's Labyrinth, *Clock Tower* creator **Hifumi Kouno** and his team at Nude Maker have teamed up with Ju-on director Takashi Shimizu on the recently announced *Project Scissors*. Their collaboration is a point-and-click survival horror game whose title invokes the murder weapon brandished by the psycho killers in the *Clock Tower* series.

"[Shimizu] has provided us with invaluable insight as a film director while we create graphic assets for the game," Kouno tells us. "He will continue to help us with his expertise in constructing the presentation of each scene."





Director Takashi Shimizu (top) has teamed up with Nude Maker CEO Hifumi Kouno to make *Project Scissors*

Kouno says that far from the film director leading the project astray by misunderstanding the unique charms of videogame horror, Shimizu's involvement has bolstered his own vision.

"We share mutual understanding and opinion for what works and what does not work in the horror genre," Kouno says. "He has provided us with precise and valuable opinions that will make the game so much scarier!"

Coming to Vita and smartphones, *Project Scissors* is set aboard a luxury cruise ship on which the passengers and crew fall victim to a host of gruesome murders. Rather than a hero, the player will assume the role of a passenger as a way of creating a sense of powerlessness within the closed confines of the ship.

Kouno tells us that he came up with the concept for the game five years ago, but that the dominance of triple-A titles and the abundance of zombie-themed action games made it hard to pitch the more suspenseful idea he had in mind. The rise of indie and mobile gaming has brought his concept back from the dead.



As an isolated case, it makes sense, but why this sudden horror influx of Biblical proportions? After all, horror genre movies are also going through a renaissance in Japan, giving rise to films such as Bilocation and The Complex. Kikuchi partly ascribes the current taste for horror to the cycles of fashion.

"In Japan, horror games and horror movies always have their fans, and new works are released every year," he says. "But once every few years, there seems to be a boom in horror titles. Also, as the hardware evolves, it offers new means to express horror – I think that explains the timing of the current boom." ■



The latest game in the *Zero* series, AKA *Fatal Frame: Oracle Of The Sodden Raven* (above, below right) taps into the traditional folklore surrounding water in its homeland, but it's got its fair share of jump scares too









The Evil Within (left, above left) not only places a premium on weapons and ammo, but its monsters don't fall easily. The sense of powerlessness gives rise to an atmosphere of terror. *PT* (above) goes one further by giving the player no defensive options other than fleeing

WORLD OF TERROR

How the best of the west is inspiring Japanese games



Influence is a virtuous loop. Japanese films were freaking out western fans long before the lank-haired ghoul in 1998's The Ring, and now The Walking Dead is feeding back into another long-running Japanese series: *Resident Evil. Revelations 2* producer **Michiteru Okabe** explained during Tokyo Game Show that the hit show was one of the major influences on the episodic structure of Capcom's forthcoming multiplatform game. "Our series was originally influenced by western horror movies, and then later a lot of western games took influence from *Resi 4*, so I think there is a cycle of inspiration – which is great," he says.

BIRD WATCH

Inside Luna, a fable based on children's literature

Luna tells the story of a young bird that is convinced by the authoritative owl you see here to swallow the last remaining piece of the waning moon. Described as a "tactile puzzle game" – and inspired by origami, sculpture and printmaking – its gameplay will focus on transforming the objects and characters in this world, and even the world itself.

"*Luna* is an interactive fable about coming to terms with mistakes, processing change, and growing into the person you choose to become," **Robin Hunicke**, CEO of developer Funomena, tells us. "We're inspired by children's literature, including Goodnight Moon, The Grouchy Ladybug and classic Golden Books, but also illustrator Mary Blair, Japanese woodcut artist Umetaro Azechi, and sculptors such as Lee Bontecou, Anish Kapoor and Gabriel Orozco. There is a magical, textural quality to the work of these artists that we felt was important for the themes of transformation we're trying to explore.

"Glenn [Hernandez] began doing concept work for the game about a year ago. We spent a long time painting, drawing and sharing notes as we collaborated on the feel of the world, focusing on building a world that was textured like Glenn's concepts, which were often done in gouache, but that still feels 3D and sculptural."

Footage of the game debuted at IndieCade this year and Funomena is moving into full production now. The image reproduced here was generated in-engine, but there's still a lot of work ahead. Hunicke says it's too early to tell whether *Luna* will arrive in 2015, but we're already looking forward to seeing more of this charming-looking concept. ■

"We also love stop-motion animated films such as Yuriy Norshteyn's Hedgehog In The Fog," Hunicke says. "Ideally, each frame of *Luna* will feel handmade, almost like stop-motion animated paper puppets"

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"We sincerely apologise for the delay. We are committed to giving you the best racing experience on PS4 – **it's taking a little longer than we hoped."**

Shuhei Yoshida holds up his hands over *DriveClub PS Plus Edition*



"We thank the court for protecting free speech. This was **an absurd lawsuit from the very beginning** and we're gratified that in the end a notorious criminal didn't win."

Rudy Giuliani on former dictator Manuel Noriega's failed *Black Ops II* lawsuit



"It was game we believed in, but we never felt that it got to where it needed to be – **we never saw a path to success** if we finished it. It wasn't up to our quality standard and we decided to cancel it."

Bethesda's **Pete Hines** confirms what we all knew already: *Prey 2*'s dead

"It's the software that matters. That's it. **There's nothing else that's going to convince you to play other than how good it is."**



The Room developer **Barry Meade** on why design still matters on mobile, and why developers don't have to be PR geniuses

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game *Showdown*
Manufacturer Sega

Codemasters' *Dirt* series usually involves denting cars, but it's the screen that's been bent out of shape for its arcade debut. The focal point of *Showdown*'s eye-catching cabinet is a 100-inch curved Hybrid Laser LED Projection display, an alternative to the in-vogue dome screen. The display is complemented by 5.1 surround sound, a force-feedback wheel and seat, and a fully modelled stainless-steel dashboard with working dials, an engine start button and a tunable radio.

The game offers four gameplay modes from the console release: standard racing in the form of Race Off; Knock Out, in which you must stay on a platform while knocking others from it; Rampage, here renamed Demolition, which takes place in an open arena; and the T-boning nightmare of 8-Ball, which becomes Crossroads. There's also a large selection of cars, 20 in total, taken from an array of classes that includes muscle, pickup, saloon and 'old-timer'.

Each seat is fitted with a player face camera, the gurning expressions from which are displayed on Showdown TV – two HD displays that sit above the fourplayer setup. *Showdown* also uses Sega's Sega Scores online portal for bragging rights. The system displays a QR code on the screen at the end of a session, allowing you to scan it with your smartphone. Following the link will allow you to track your rating for specific locations, regions and even cabinets, plus your position on the global leaderboard.



My Favourite Game
Susan Calman

The comedian and writer on imaginary drive-by shootings, an obsession with Resident Evil, and gaming first dates

Susan Calman is a Scottish comedian, writer and actor who regularly guests as a panellist on BBC Radio 4 shows including The News Quiz and The Unbelievable Truth. In 2007, she won a BAFTA as part of the cast of Channel 4 sketch show Blowout, while last year saw the debut of her first solo series, Susan Calman Is Convicted, on Radio 4. Throughout all of this, she's remained a passionate advocate for videogames.

In 2011, you said on Radio 4's Dilemma that when you're driving you sometimes pretend to shoot people at traffic lights as if you're in *Grand Theft Auto*. Have you retained that habit?
[Laughs] Sometimes, yes! It's the argument against videogames, I realise, that videogames are terrible because they increase violence. Well, no – it's just fun sometimes. It's just fun, I think, to shoot people at the traffic lights.

Do you remember your earliest gaming experience, drive-by or otherwise?
We had an Atari console and I remember my first experience was watching my brother play *Indiana Jones*. We had a BBC as well, so basically *Chuckie Egg* and those kinds of games. Probably because my big brother was playing them, I thought games were really cool. And then the first console I got was an N64. After that, I decided to get a PlayStation, because I had an American flatmate at the time who told me *Resident Evil* was the best game ever. So we used to rent *Resident Evil* from Blockbuster, then from the Friday until the Monday morning we would play it, and then I'd give it back and then rent it again. We should have just bought it! And from then on I've been a PlayStation girl, to be honest.

QUIZZICAL
Calman is currently on her first ever UK tour, titled Lady Like, which runs until April 2015. In between tour dates, she's working on a Radio 4 sitcom and a forthcoming comedy jam, and is reading a script for a new Channel 4 show. She'll also be hosting a new Radio 2 panel show in which she's "hoping to increase the gaming quotient on Radio 2 with questions about gaming – I try to do it wherever I go. I generally do it because I think when you find another gaming nerd that you can really talk to about it, it's brilliant."



Is your wife interested in videogames?
Well, one of the reasons that it works is that she is more of a gamer than I am. I'm not in the house very much and sometimes I'm not even out the door before I hear the PlayStation going on. I remember some of our first dates [when] we were just sitting and playing games.

How about the people you work with? Most News Quiz panellists don't come across as gaming-savvy.
That might be something you could say, yes! I mean, a lot of comics of my generation play games, and sometimes I'll speak to [News Quiz presenter] Sandi Toksvig about it, but she has no interest at all in gaming. You know, I try to explain to her that to me it's a bigger issue than gaming: it's the art direction, it's the music, it's the expression. And there's a huge amount of controversy about women in gaming, but younger people come to my shows and stuff and I say I think it's a great thing for women to get into – not just in gaming terms, but in storylining, art direction, music. It's a bigger industry than just some guys in their pants shooting things.

> "I say to people, 'Have you seen The Last Of Us? It's much more than what you might think gaming is'"

So you're something of an evangelist?
I try to say to people, "Have you seen *The Last Of Us*? Have you seen some of these other games?" It's much more than [shooting]. It's much more than what you might think gaming is. So, I do try!

Have any of the games you've played done a good job of representing women, or alternative sexualities?
Well, the alternative sexuality thing is another debate, which is an interesting one. It's a diversity issue, rather than just a sexuality or gender one, and my view has always been that games are rubbish at it. But then so is television and film, you know? If you watch Ripper Street, which is an interesting show, women are slapped every five seconds for some unknown reason, but I don't turn my back on film or TV. I think the problem is that if you try to look at alternative sexualities to a be a representation of LGBT people in games, it's just not happening yet. I mean, there's no question that the game industry is really far behind anywhere else in that regard, but at the same time to me it's not about having a lesbian hero, it's just about having a woman who has genuine and understandable complex feelings.

What's your favourite game?
Now, I love all the games I know people are going to shout that I should love, but in terms of the excitement that I felt when I first played it, it would probably be *Arkham Asylum*. Now, there's lots of others, believe me, but genuinely, while it has faults and it's repetitive and the combat system is problematic and everything else, I *loved* it. ■



Calman's current work includes writing a sitcom for Radio 4 featuring a female character who's into videogames

WEBSITE

Vin Hill art
http://bit.ly/acvrisingsun

Aspiring concept artist Vin Hill is looking to make a name for himself in the industry with an *Assassin's Creed*-themed personal project. In it, Hill imagines a new game set during the Meiji restoration in Japan circa 1868. His pre-production work includes contemporary samurai outfits – which, of course, integrate the series' iconic hood – detailed weapon designs, and some rather fetching sunset scenes of Kyoto. Hill has even conceived the player's path through the game, setting a route from Kyoto to Osaka before eventually reaching Tokyo, with the modernisation of Japan increasingly evident in each new city. The idea of playing a samurai assassin is certainly appealing, but with *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China* on the way, Ubisoft probably won't be looking to Japan just yet.





VIDEO

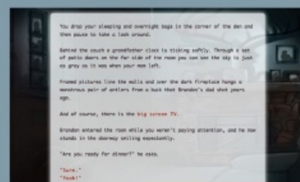
The Genesis Power Team
http://bit.ly/genesispower

Music video director Tyler Esposito recently unearthed an old VHS tape that he and his father made in 1991. A promo video created in the style of contemporary videogame TV shows, The Genesis Power Team sees a rather shy Esposito and his effusive father attempting to promote the virtues of going 16bit to New York relatives still clinging to their NES. The pair rattle through a long list of games including Esposito's favourite, *Castle Of Illusion*, offering plenty of nostalgic appeal. But it's Esposito's relationship with his father – and their shared love of games – that gives the video another dimension.

WEB GAME

The Uncle Who Worked For Nintendo
http://bit.ly/theuncle

The latest unnerving horror fiction from *My Father's Long, Long Legs* developer Michael Lutz is a collaboration with illustrator Kim Parker that explores nostalgia-tinged memories of a friend with connections. In this case, a pal's uncle who works for Nintendo and has access to all manner of exciting treasures, from limited editions of games to prototype consoles. But there's something darker lurking behind the tale's facade, which you unravel during a sleepover at your friend's house. It's a short game, but there are six endings to find, and while essentially a text adventure, Parker's illustrations bring *Uncle*'s universe into focus while some particularly chilling audio work will keep the game embedded in your mind for some time after its completion.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

BOOK

Sega Mega Drive/Genesis: Collected Works
http://readonlymemory.vg

The result of a hugely successful Kickstarter campaign from the end of last year, Collected Works brings together a written history of Sega's console, authored by Guardian games editor Keith Stuart, with a remarkable compendium of game design documents, concept sketches, previously unseen hardware plans and vivid game and box artwork. Stuart's text is suffused with industry interviews featuring the likes of Sega founder David Rosen and president Hayao Nakayama. Even more names feature in a collection of 28 interviews with original Sega developers at the back of the book, which includes insight from key players such as Yu Suzuki, Naoto Ohshima and Yuji Naka. It's an attractive distraction for anyone with a passing interest in games, but for Mega Drive fans this is essential.



continue

Irons fist
Kevin Spacey, Hugh Laurie – more pro actors in videogames, please

Red potion
Nintendo president Satoru Iwata is on the mend after surgery

Birdman returns
We haven't played a new *Tony Hawk* game in five years

Dangerous times
Elite: Dangerous has an official release date

quit

QTEs
We still aren't done with them? Look, *Dragon's Lair* was released in *1983*

A Dead end
The Walking Dead's long-running save-data issues infect some PS4 users

Bailing out
The *Tony Hawk* game we played five years ago was *Shred*

Expensive times
That means we need new flight sticks, surely

TWEETS

There's no such thing as a casual gamer really, just lazy game designers.
Zach Gage @helvetica
Game designer

Homophobes boycotting Apple because of Tim Cook's brave announcement are going to lose it when they hear about Turing.
Joe Gravett @joegravett
Independent business change consultant

Writing and testing AI code is a good way to reassure yourself that the Rise of the Robots is a looooooong way off.
Jake Solomon @SolomonJake
Game designer, Firaxis

Arguing with a troll online is like trying to teach a goat to drive. No one's happy & your car is ruined & it's still a goat.
Kumail Nanjiani @kumailn
Comedian



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DISPATCHES
CHRISTMAS



Issue 273

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a SteelSeries Wireless H Headset, or an Apex keyboard plus Sensei Wireless Laser mouse



Drowned in sound

It occurs to me that sound is an often-ignored part of games, both in terms of its design and how it effects our experiences. As a budding sound designer, I've become attuned to the state of our community's general attitude to game sound, and it's pretty shocking. Few reviews comment on sound, and while system specifications for PC games fetishistically list all the parts necessary for superb visual display, they never recommend a soundcard or advise you to use a 5.1 Surround Sound system.

This really hit home when I started playing *Alien: Isolation*. The game sounds absolutely amazing, from the off-key violin shrieks behind you as you step through doors, daring you to look behind, to the death throes of Sevastopol Station (almost indistinguishable from human screams) and Ripley's voice spoken intimately close to the mic.

Alien: Isolation is designed to be played in surround sound. This is the way it's been mixed and edited, with full multidimensionality. The game's sounds are produced to a cinematic calibre and they require a home cinematic system to be experienced properly. So why is this fact omitted from the system specification on Steam? Why doesn't it appear on the game's outer packaging? How many people are missing out? What does this say about the industry's attitude to its sound designers?

> "Alien: Isolation is designed to be played in surround sound, so why isn't it on the box?"

As gamers, we appear to regularly forget that sound plays just as important a role as vision in creating the environments we enjoy. *System Shock 2* works because you can hear the moans of the mutants in the corridors, but you don't know where they are, and ditto for *Minecraft*'s zombies and Creepers. The sound of footsteps creeping up behind you in *PT* is scary as all hell, and you can't help but turn around when doors creak and slam shut. Even non-horror games such as *Sword & Sworcery*, *Rome II* and *Skyrim* all use audio to both unify and enrich the gameworld and our experience of it.

With games like *Alien: Isolation* and *PT*, we're just starting to see the results of a modern approach to game sound design. Games are telling us that they can be the forerunners of sound design, pioneers in the drive towards 3D and VR immersion. It's about time we started listening.
Ashleigh Allan

Playing games through a surround sound setup is ideal but, like the graphics cards you mention, it's tech that not everyone can afford. A good alternative is a fine pair of headphones, of course, which just happens to be one of the options available from the SteelSeries kit you've landed yourself. In the future, we'll try to be a bit more mindful of audio content during the review process.

Online/offline

When are developers going to learn about online launches? I am, of course, referring to *DriveClub*, which through a staggering combination of mismanagement and weak server infrastructure managed to arrive through the post with basically every feature I'd bought the game for missing in action. Patching it 'later' is unacceptable when your whole marketing revolves around driving with friends, and while the singleplayer mode gives an enticing hint at what might have been – and apparently what reviewers reviewed – it simply isn't good enough.

It's not the first time we've been burned by big promises and terrible launches. *Sim City* springs to mind, but so does *Grand Theft Auto V* and the *Evolve* alpha, for which I wasted over 12GB of bandwidth only to fail to connect to a single game. Yes, it's 'only' an alpha, but it shows exactly how



www.facebook.com/edgeonline
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers

underprepared game server estimates are by default. Here's an idea: if you're going to make your game online-only, how about you build your infrastructure to cope with all the players who have paid to play your game on day one?

In fact, anything else is surely gross misrepresentation. I would return an MP3 player that couldn't play music until a week or a month after I took it out of the box, and I would expect a full refund. Publishers and platform holders likewise need to start being held accountable and losing revenue if they are ever to learn that you cannot lie to consumers. As it stands, they err on the side of buying the cheapest possible infrastructure and then watching as the servers topple over, shrugging and going back to totting up the shareholder reports.
Phil Tully

MP3 manufacturers don't tend to offer early-access releases, though. And if *DriveClub* were an MP3 player it *would* play music from day one – just not with other people. Still, it's definitely frustrating when a game launches with missing features – especially when they were available to reviewers. Of course, while it's not always true for downloads, in the case of retail releases you can return games for full refunds if you're not happy with them.

Pretty vacant

I am not, it has to be said, the most devoted *Call Of Duty* follower, but nor am I a detractor. But I am growing increasingly tired of the series' lack of any discernible artistry. I have no problem at all with *Call Of Duty*'s bombast, blinkered linearity or repeating formula – these are all facets shared by *Battlefield*, which I also enjoy. But DICE's artists understand that explosive gameplay can be counterpointed by visual subtlety, whereas the people making *Advanced Warfare* seem to take a spray-and-pray artistic approach that's echoes the game's loadout.

There are plenty of ostensibly next-gen graphical effects going on (usually all at once), but they feel slapped on over some pretty ugly geometry. The textures are samey and uninspiring, and everything feels incredibly busy, making it difficult to discern what's going on. It's already tough enough distinguishing your teammates from the enemy – unless they're stood right to you, everyone's a black smudge until you put your crosshair over them and reveal the blue outline that denotes allies (an appropriate colour, given the number of blue-on-blue atrocities I've committed as a result of this).

I know it's a completely different style of game, but after playing *Alien: Isolation* my expectations for detailed science-fiction environments have been raised a great deal. A next-gen firstperson shooter should be dazzling to look at, but while *Advanced Warfare* occasionally looks impressive, it feels just as hampered by its last-gen versions as *Ghosts* did, only it's wearing a thicker layer of smeared-on next-gen makeup this time around. I'll admit that *Advanced Warfare*'s character models look incredible in the cutscenes, but I can't help but feel that if they'd really tried, the whole game could have looked like that. *Battlefield 4* had Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 versions, too, but it looked fantastic on my PlayStation 4 – it felt made for it, in fact, and only then downscaled for the older consoles, rather than warmed up after the fact.
Richard Crooke

Advanced Warfare's real achievements lie in how much is happening onscreen at any one time, and the pace everything clips along at, but Activision would surely admit that having to create 360 and PS3 versions hindered the overall creative vision rather than helped it. At least *COD*'s main focus is its multiplayer, which needs to be fast and stable – two things *Battlefield 4* struggled with at launch.

New horizons

There's something about visiting a new game world that's really exciting, but all too often these places are just a backdrop to whatever's happening in the story rather than places in their own right. I'm the kind of person who likes to explore in the brief quiet after a gunfight, or deliberately venture as far down the corridor to the left as possible before submitting to the game designer's obvious desire for me to take the one on the right. Which is why I was so pleased to see a game all about exploration over anything else on the cover of **E**273.

From what you say, *Rime* sounds like it's been designed especially for me, and the obvious *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus* references just make me even more excited about the prospect of striking out into its world. But I was also very excited to read about *Assassin's Creed Unity* in your preview. I've enjoyed navigating that series' worlds over the years, but I kind of get bored of the games themselves quite quickly. It sounds like Ubisoft is making exploration much more a part of gameplay, and I, for one, hope they pull that off.

And while I'm not particularly a fan of spaceships, I guess *Elite: Dangerous* represents that sense of adventure even more (even if *No Man's Sky* is more immediately appealing to me). But whether it's clambering up buildings, running around on an island or zipping about in uncharted space, it was certainly refreshing to see so many developers taking their worlds as seriously as the games they set within them. I really hope this trend continues.
Alex Ritchie

You're right: it does appear to be a trend, and one that we're happy to celebrate with an **Edge** cover or two. In terms of it continuing, consider Jonathan Blow's *The Witness* and The Chinese Room's *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*. We dare say *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* will offer up some decent views, too. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Here I am, golfing in the desert. Why am I golfing in the desert? It doesn't matter. This, apparently, is where I like to golf. In a place that is literally nothing but a giant sand trap. The brownish-orange of the dunes, sculpted by some sadist into improbably angular forts and peaks; the Beijing-smog orange-grey of the sky; the pert little flag next to the hole where somehow I must direct the ball. I say "I", but I am nowhere to be seen in this bleak environment. It's just the ball, the hole, and the flag. And untold miles of sand.

When by some miracle the ball goes into the hole, the desertscape scrolls laterally a single screen, and the ball is pushed up from the old hole by some mechanism that makes a grating, rumbling sound. It is like some kind of satirical psychological-test machinery left around on an island like the one in Lost. A desert island, of course.

Surely you are taking this desert too seriously, the sensible **Edge** reader objects. And perhaps I am. *Desert Golfing* is, after all, just a cunning little *Angry Birds*-alike in which you fire the ball not by swinging anything resembling a club, but by swiping your finger anywhere on the screen to trigger a familiar bow-and-arrow direction-and-strength mechanic. The fact that the ball bounces around on sand is important for the teasing physics of the game (the sand's friction and drag makes those moments when the ball is crawling towards the hole and finally drops in all the more delicious), but the environment is drawn so simply that it might sound silly to harp on too much about it. And yet, frankly, I find this desert fascinating, horrifying, funny, and oppressive. This is a desert of the mind. It is not a real desert. It is the desert of the real.

We knew already, of course, that the simplest representations can be the most evocative. *Desert Golfing* reminds me in this way of the far more sophisticated arthouse tourism of *Proteus*, with its square white pixel blossoms and chunky trees, and the way it seems to be themed partly around a nostalgia for magenta as one of only a few possible computer-display colours. *Proteus* would not work in the same way – as a digital themepark of abstracted, idealised nature – if its animals had detailed faces, or if you could identify plant species, because it derives its aesthetic power from impressionistic generality.



Frankly, I find this desert fascinating, horrifying, funny, and oppressive. This is a desert of the mind

Yet *Proteus*, when it first came out, was one of those games that periodically generate passionate arguments about whether they are games at all. (Clue: it ran on a computer system, it wasn't a media player or authoring tool or 'productivity' software, and it didn't do anything unless you also did things. Therefore, it was a game.) It's obvious, on the other hand, that *Desert Golfing* is a game, because golf is a game, and this is a simulation of it. Or at least, given the 2D, side-on viewpoint, a simulation of some type of game that is halfway between golf and, say, basketball. (Sometimes you feel as though you are trying to throw the ball into the hole.)

But *Desert Golfing* is also a profoundly severe game, in that there is no practice possible, and no resetting of holes allowed. Instead, you just play one hole after another and your stroke count goes inexorably upwards. In this sense, *Desert Golfing* is existentially terrifying and theologically unforgiving: sins (bogeys) can never be expiated or erased from the record. They just accumulate relentlessly throughout the game, like mistakes throughout a life.

It must be the cruel abstraction of *Desert Golfing*, then, that reminds me of another, very different but also highly evocative game, based around a panoptical mechanic of achieving altitude and therefore visual command of the environment. It was Geoff Crammond's 1986 masterpiece *The Sentinel*, a moody, minimalist strategy game that gave a convincing impression of a solid 3D world even on 8bit computers.

The official sequel, 1998's *The Sentinel Returns*, featured a properly polygonal world with colourful lighting, more detailed objects, and elaborate skyboxes. And because of this, it had less of the atmosphere that had always haunted me in the original – the feeling that *The Sentinel*'s monochrome polygonal landscapes were themselves a kind of perilous desert. Much less elaborate than *The Sentinel*, *Desert Golfing* is, too, only a game – but, as with all seriously crafted miniaturism, its aesthetic choices may resonate far beyond the bezels of your phone.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

Illustration marshdavies.com



IAN BOGOST

Difficulty Switch

Hard game criticism

Just as I was about to tear open the plastic wrapper of *Need For Speed: Rivals*, my son warned: "There's no multiplayer." It was a startling discovery, especially since I bought the game expressly to play it with him. After all, isn't a videogame two people challenging one another to a duel?

That's what it meant for decades, anyway. In 1958, Willy Higinbotham made a makeshift tennis game that ran on the oscilloscope in his research lab. In 1962, MIT researchers made *Spacewar*, a twoplayer space combat game. Nolan Bushnell made an unsuccessful coin-op adaptation of it in 1971. The next year, he and Al Alcorn designed *Pong*, which allowed two players to compete with one another at an abstraction of table tennis. Four years earlier, Ralph Baer had made a similar game prototype for TVs. Atari's 1977 Video Computer System (AKA 2600) and Mattel's 1979 Intellivision continued the tradition for a time. Even at home, games were mostly trials waged between humans, mediated by a computer.

It wasn't the microcomputer but the minicomputer – the DEC PDP in particular – that had birthed games like *Spacewar*, and while it was a social computer, used in research labs, it was also a solitary one.

That's where the adventure game arises. In the early 1970s, William Crowther made a simulated caving game he could play on the PDP-10 minicomputer at his employer, a defence contractor. He thought the game, *Colossal Cave*, would give him something to do with his daughters when they visited. Crowther had recently been divorced, and ironically the solitude of separation served up the time necessary to write the game in the first place.

It was played by typing commands into a computer, which would parse and interpret them as movements and actions. It was an idea Crowther borrowed from MIT researcher Joseph Weizenbaum's 1966 ELIZA program, a virtual Rogerian psychotherapist. Much to Weizenbaum's chagrin, sometimes it didn't matter that ELIZA's 'patients' knew it was a program and not a human interlocutor.



Games supporting multiplayer modes like this are curiosities. They are indulgences, often infantilised ones

Eventually, we could play both single- and multiplayer games on consoles, arcade cabinets, and on PCs, but the personal computer always leaned towards the solitary experience of the player versus a computational foe or environment, while the console retained the social experience of twoplayer challenge first conceived in the research labs of the 1960s and the arcades of the 1970s and 1980s.

The social contexts for these apparatuses largely set the stage for how they were used for games. The microcomputer was a solitary device, a work appliance meant to make tasks more efficient. It was (and still is) a single terminal best used by an individual. The coin-op cabinet could be played alone, but was large enough to be shared – and it was situated in the raucous social setting of the tavern or arcade. And the home console was stationed in the living room or den, the great new electronic hearth of 20th century living.

Today, a different shift has taken place. The arcade has long since atrophied, but both the PC and the console are now implicated in a different, larger social space: the Internet. Being online is now something we can do all the time, everywhere. In fact, being online is the norm, bar the actual failure of communication infrastructure. When you can go online, what point is there in differentiating the desk from the den?

Today, games that support play in the sense I wanted with *Need For Speed* are curiosities. They are indulgences, often infantilised ones. *Mario Kart* and *Super Smash Bros* offer childish exceptions that kids and adults alike feel no need to apologise for, but otherwise the splitscreen, twoplayer shooter or driving game or fighting game has been largely excised in favour of online play. Colocation is unnecessary, inconvenient.

The videogame is not alone in having abandoned the electronic hearth. The television is also in decline, replaced by streaming digital video to phones and tablets and computer monitors. Increasingly, TV is also something we watch alone, or at least not colocated with our fellow viewers. Competitive, twoplayer head-to-head games forced us to share that device, to make room for one another within it – literally in most cases, both via split screens and via our bodies' positions on chairs and couches. The end of splitscreen is nigh, and with it, half a century of games as contests between two parties who can look one another in the eye.

Ian Bogost is an author and game designer. His award-winning A Slow Year *is available at www.bit.ly/1eQalad*

Illustration marshdavies.com



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

While I used to play a lot of *Street Fighter*, I don't any more, because it has recently become crushingly apparent that the pitter-patter of tiny feet is quite incompatible with the clickety-clack of an arcade stick. But for a number of years, *Street Fighter IV* was just about all I played, and it was certainly all I played online. Endless Battle mode was a Friday evening fixture, a weekly, wine-soaked, winner-stays-on session with seven friends. But Ranked matches were different: single face-offs against anonymous foes, all of them playing to win and prepared to resort to all manner of nefarious tactics to do so. It was horrible, in an irresistible sort of way.

One particular match against an unpleasant Ken sticks in the memory. Ken had a bad rep in those days, seen as the choice of the brainless, winning by mashing dragon punch inputs all match long. I play Ken too, and have long seen it as a sort of duty to repair his reputation. I try to play him with style and respect. Against another Ken, though? One like this? Forget all that. I can mash with the best of them.

I lost, horribly, and the ragemail arrived, my opponent taking loudly homophobic offence at my having dressed Ken in a shocking pink cowboy outfit. I got my own back by inviting them to an Endless lobby, waiting until they joined, then leaving the room for ten minutes to pop the kettle on. When I returned, they were gone, and there was another message waiting. "Come on Freddie Mercury start the match u fukin dickhead." Stuff like that. Another invite, another exit, another message. Forty minutes later, he was telling me to stop harassing him or he'd report me to Microsoft. I won, horribly, and while it made me feel better about the loss and the abuse that followed, I couldn't help but question how I was choosing to spend my free time. I'd just spent 40 minutes in the kitchen drinking a frankly unnecessary amount of tea and cackling at a man on the Internet.



Illustration marshdavies.com

Perhaps if games stop putting players in a situation that will make them angry, everyone will get along fine

It was enough to put me off online gaming, for the most part, for a few years. If I did play online, it was either with friends or with no headset, my account preferences tweaked so that randoms couldn't send me messages. Whenever a developer claims their in-progress game is going to revolutionise co-op, seamlessly matchmaking groups of random players who will have the time of their lives, I am immediately sceptical. People, after all, are awful.

And then there was *Destiny*. I rolled my eyes when a Bungie dev at a preview event described how I'd be struggling against a tough foe and would be saved by other players coming over the hill with rocket launchers. I thought it more likely they'd hang back, wait for me to die, then stroll in to mop up and take the spoils for themselves. Imagine my surprise, then, that this has the friendliest online playerbase a big console game has had in years.

In *Destiny*, I chat cordially with players I've never met. I am revived in boss fights by players many levels higher than me whose time I am clearly wasting. A few nights ago, out patrolling the Moon, I saw another player running along a high ledge towards a loot chest. *Destiny*'s chests spawn randomly, and disappear a few seconds after first opened, though they dish out loot to all-comers in that period. This unknown Guardian saw me, waved, pointed back down the way to show how he got up onto the ledge, then waited for me to join him before he opened the chest. I was stunned. Even PvP seems to be fine, perhaps because you can't really complain about anything in such a deliciously broken multiplayer mode. Ragemail, headset abuse, griefing: all have become accepted standards in online games, and particularly in online shooters. In *Destiny*, the first major online game of the generation, there's none of it.

Ever since *Halo 2*'s online community turned racist, sexist, homophobic headset invective into a massmarket pursuit, we have collectively, and understandably, blamed the players. But it only takes one person to lower the tone, and mob mentality is such that it will become progressively lower as the virus spreads. It's how a difference of opinion leads to death threats, and a stolen kill to a volley of racism. Perhaps, as *Destiny* suggests, it's simply a question of design, and if games stop putting players in a situation that will make them angry, everyone will get along fine. By that logic, I should never play *Street Fighter* again, and we should all probably quit Twitter for good.

Nathan Brown is **Edge***'s deputy editor, and he has some pretty choice jokes about your mother to share later*



WINNER OF
OVER 160
AWARDS









#274

HYPE

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra **Hype** content

The bad touch

Mud sticks, but it's a special kind of sticky in videogames. When a beloved band releases a bad album, or a revered director puts out a stinker, it's their personal stock that falls, and theirs alone. Few pin the blame on the record label or film studio that allowed it to happen. We see music and films as being made by individuals – or small groups of them. When a game goes bad, the entire studio tends to carry the can.

This issue, we look at two games whose very announcements were greeted with suspicion. *Battlefield Hardline* (p38) is being developed by Visceral, which has never made a game in this series before, but still finds itself saddled with its legacy. After all, a series of botched online launches was a large contributing factor in publisher EA being voted the Worst Company In America two years in a row. Given Visceral's history as the studio behind *Dead Space*, and *Battlefield*'s never-ending multiplayer problems, it's understandable that the studio is trying to focus attention on *Hardline*'s singleplayer component. Until the game has launched, however, suspicion will prevail, whatever the developers do or say in the meantime.

Yet for all the anti-EA sentiment, at least the *Battlefield* games that land on retail shelves look the same as they did in previews. Gearbox Software, maker of *Battleborn* (p42), is still trying to live down the furore over *Aliens: Colonial Marines*, which looked excellent at trade shows and preview events and like a completely different, dramatically worse game in its final form. Gearbox is making all the right noises about its blend of MOBA, FPS and fighting game mechanics, but it has to sell more than a new idea to players, it has to sell itself all over again, proving that it has more to offer than *Borderlands* or empty promises. A band can make another album, and a director another film. Yet one bad game too many can kill an entire studio, spelling unemployment for hundreds. In games, there's a lot more than reputation at stake.

MOST WANTED

Game Of Thrones Fire TV, PC, others TBC
Winter is coming, and so too is Telltale's take on George RR Martin's novels, with the first episode confirmed for release before the year is out. Details remain scant, but here's hoping player choice will be more important than in the disappointingly linear *Wolf Among Us*.

Galax-Z PC, PS4, Vita
17-Bit's 2D space shooter has resurfaced. Still drawing on a Saturday-morning anime style, it's now one part physics toy, one part Roguelike. But it's the advanced AI that intrigues. With dogged pilots who employ smart tactics, it promises to be a very special kind of bullet hell.

Crackdown Xbox One
Sunset Overdrive's bounding open-world chaos has whetted our appetite for a new *Crackdown* which, if it even comes close to the multiplayer promise of the reveal trailer shown at E3 in June, will be an explosive addition to Xbox One's lineup.

HYPE

BATTLEFIELD HARDLINE

Is Visceral's military shooter in a new uniform cut out for police work?

Publisher EA
Developer Visceral Games
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One
Origin US
Release March 17 (NA), 20 (EU)



There was never much hope that *Hardline* – the first *Battlefield* to star a member of US law enforcement – would be a vehicle for serious social commentary, as timely as such comment might be in the wake of the violent clashes between enforcers and protesters in Ferguson, Missouri, which have underlined the extent of the US state police's dependence on military-grade hardware. *Hardline* is certainly alive to the appeal of the latter, but this also means it risks provoking a scandal by courting a real-world parallel too energetically. Even disregarding the fallout from the previous two *Battlefield* launches, this is surely not an enticing prospect for EA, a publisher still living down its twice-awarded Worst Company In America tag, and facing nomination for the award again this year.

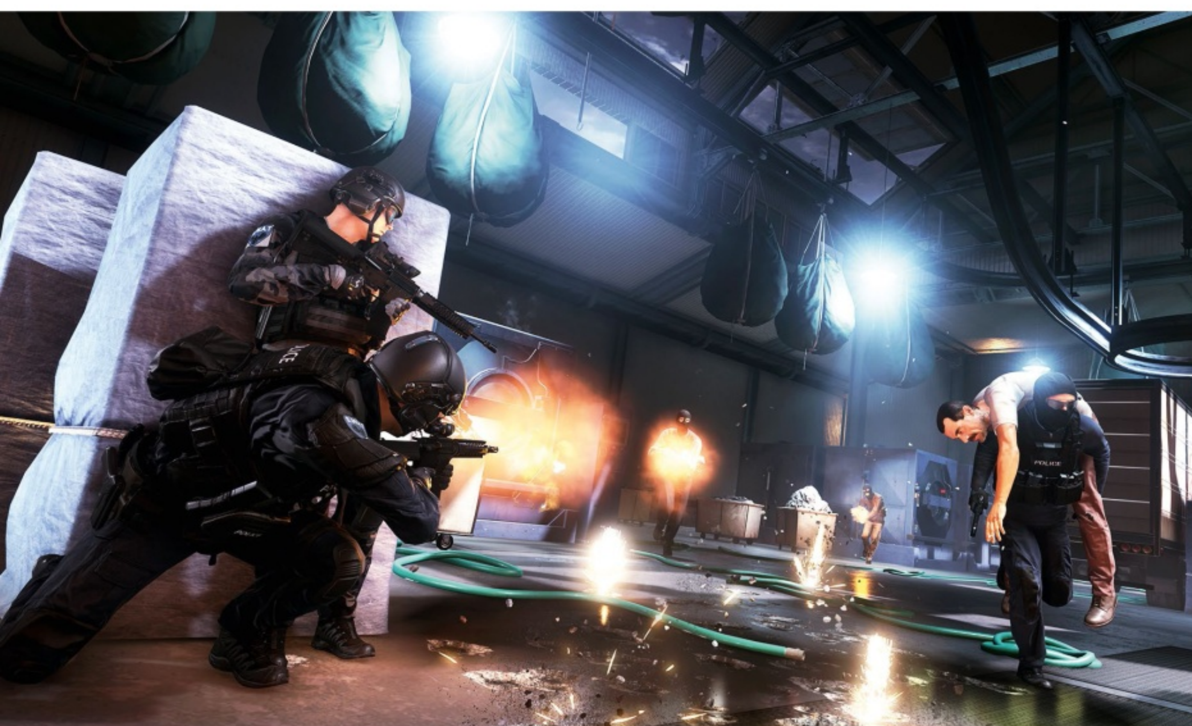
Thus, *Hardline* appears to be a game about police work in much the same way that *Call Of Duty: Black Ops II* was a game about drone warfare: it's content to scrape the surface of troublesome issues for atmospheric purposes, taking its cues from road-tested explorations of those issues in television and films such as Michael Mann's Heat. Executive producer and Visceral GM **Steve Papoutsis**'s thoughts are predictably deflating. "We by no means wanted to create a political statement with our game," he tells us. "We're making an entertainment experience, just like you see on TV and film. Recently, there have been some events that are very sad and not cool, but our game isn't the platform to take that on. We never intended any political undertones."

And yet the portrayal of Miami's suburbs is arrestingly charged. An early mission begins with a drive through a rough neighbourhood in search of an underworld boss that sees player character Nick Mendoza riding shotgun while his partner, Khai, doles out exposition and banter. It's a familiar introductory device, but worth it for the social backdrop. At an intersection, a well-built young man lingers in front of the bonnet to shoot the detectives an ominous look. Later, a bedraggled old-timer staggers up to the windshield toting a rag and spray; when waved away, he screams an imprecation at the vehicle as it crosses a train track. Long before the shooting begins, there's a sense of being under siege, protected yet exposed by the cop car and what it represents.

The audio design, meanwhile, puts in a fine impersonation of the crowded soundtrack of an American metropolis. Sirens, the hum of distant planes, music and laughter seep into one another as Mendoza and Khai tiptoe through grubby tenement courtyards, throwing bullet casings to distract watchful gangsters. There's doubtless an intriguing story to be told against such an elaborately ▶



Steve Papoutsis, general manager of Visceral Games



ABOVE **Calling shotgun takes on a more literal meaning when you can keep shooting from the passenger's seat, or pop out the window to continue your drive-by.** LEFT **The series' focus on teamwork is intact, the multiplayer modes doling out points for successful break-ins, loot collection, and disarms as well as kills and squad wipes**





For all that there's powerful realism in the campaign's opening moments, it's soon discarded for bank heists torn from the *GTA* playbook and, rather less plausibly, The Dukes Of Hazzard

researched and rendered backdrop, but Mendoza's doesn't feel like that yarn – so far, at least. A hot-tempered rising star from the streets with daddy issues, he seems too obviously the result of a fondness for pulp fiction to inspire much empathy.

In any case, the campaign soon escalates beyond street-level naturalism, becoming a taut action extravaganza with zipline getaways that call to mind the bank robbery from The Dark Knight. These sections merge tools from the numbered *Battlefield* games with open-ended setpieces that are clearly influenced by *Far Cry 3*'s outpost assaults. It's here that the campaign is strongest, and it all starts with a gadget. While shadowing a wired-up goon, the aptly nicknamed Tap, Mendoza is handed a police scanner that can be used to radar-tag hoodlums and objects of note, such as crates of weapons or alarms. Equipped with a scoped mic, it also offers a means of eavesdropping on suspects and scouring crime scenes for evidence, a mechanic that feeds into an overarching subplot in which you assemble a case against underworld kingpins.

From this point, many encounters settle into a familiar pattern. You'll mark up all the enemies in the area, sniff around for flanking routes, vantage points and entrances, then pick your guns and go on the offensive. The addition of a grappling hook and zipline launcher complement this tactical freedom, as do the larger, tiered environs – you might ascend to a garage roof in order to get a better view, then zipline into the middle of the enemy position, LMG at the ready. A later encounter flips this around, calling on you to hold the floors of a penthouse office against SWAT troopers equipped with flashlights and shotguns. Meanwhile, the frequency of equipment crates, which allow loadouts to be customised mid-mission without penalty, is an incentive to experiment. This stems, says Papoutsis, from the realisation that players used only a fraction of *Battlefield*'s lovingly crafted tools of destruction in past campaigns. "They have their shotgun, they have their pistol, and they're done," he explains, ruefully.

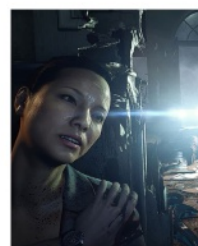
The arsenal is more diverse, too, taking in weapons born of the new premise, such as snub-nosed revolvers, nightsticks and tasers, as well as old favourites, such as tactical shotguns, sniper rifles and RPGs. As ever, optional scopes, magazine modifications and camo schemes are in abundance. There's a new progression system, however, which is again designed to encourage players to try out new toys as they progress. Those who opt for noisy tactics earn points towards the Loose Cannon bracket, while ninjas climb the ranks in Perfectionist, with rewards for each. It's not quite Paragon versus Renegade – there don't appear to be plot repercussions for the Die Hard approach – but it could lead to a more flexible, replay-friendly shooter.

Hardline also seems a cleaner fit for stealth than past *Battlefield*s. Nonlethal takedowns are cleverly handled: you'll need to flash Mendoza's badge to hold up the target, then keep them in your sights until you're close enough to slap on the cuffs. This is trickier when more than one criminal is involved:

> ***A grappling hook and zipline launcher complement tactical freedom, as do tiered environs***

the longer a suspect is left, the greater the risk of counterattack, and you can't collar enemies once they're fighting you. Some foes are subject to arrest warrants, which can be cashed in provided you complete the job and don't waltz your mark into a trip mine.

It all adds up to the most promising *Battlefield* singleplayer component in recent memory, though there's still room for improvement. The open-ended tussles over fortifications are an unambiguously good move, as are the incentives to try out every weapon in the locker, but there are still plenty of humdrum sequences, such as missions in which you follow an AI character's scripted lead. In this regard, as in its portrayal of suburban deprivation, *Hardline* feels like a transition project for *Battlefield*, a game that hasn't quite gone the distance. It's testament, at least, to Visceral's creative chops that a *Battlefield* campaign finally seems as worthy of discussion as the multiplayer. If nothing else, there will be something worthwhile to do when the servers fall over on launch day. ■



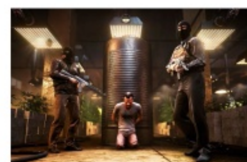
A touch of frost

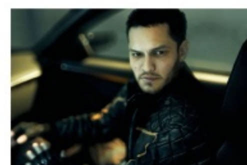
While still largely DICE's creation, the Frostbite engine has become a company-wide collaborative project – each studio that uses the tech feeds ideas back into a shared codebase. "A lot of the fixes that you see in the wild for *Battlefield 4* come from all across the studios," says Papoutsis. "It's a collective effort to improve the overall stability for the games using Frostbite." Visceral's chief contributions this time consist of new AI routines and revised handling for civilian cars. But, as Papoutsis says, "There are small things that might not make a big difference to people. For instance, when our cars collide in multiplayer, they can trade paint. And we've added screen-based reflections, where ground water might reflect the characters."











TOP **Hotwire mode places the emphasis on vehicular combat, the criminals charged with grabbing marked cars and then making good their escape.** ABOVE **Mendoza and his partner, Khai Minh Dao, will work increasingly off the books, with corruption and power themes of their tale.** MAIN **The improvements to Frostbite include the ability to trade paint – something you can expect to see a lot of in Hotwire matches**



TOP **Rescue mode is a five-on-five, six-round-long challenge to save or defend hostages. Death is also permanent each round, adding to the tension.** RIGHT **Outpost assaults borrow from the *Far Cry* template, giving you several ways to approach the base and a tool with which to tag up patrolling guards**

H Y
P E

BATTLEBORN

A post-Aliens Gearbox seeks rebirth through the 'hero shooter'

Publisher 2K Games
Developer Gearbox Software
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin US
Release 2015

With legal proceedings over *Aliens: Colonial Marines* still rumbling on, Gearbox's recent failures won't be forgotten quickly. But while their influence is felt in how we're shown *Battleborn* (more on that later), this is a game that exhibits more in common with the studio's greatest homegrown success than its licensed letdown. The hook is that it casts the net even wider than *Borderlands*, harvesting bits of fighting games and MOBAs as well as RPGs to splice into the firstperson shooter, which can still be considered the foundation of the gameplay. Gearbox even has a name for its new amalgamation: the hero shooter.

"A lot of the process by which we came to create this came down to, 'What would you love to be able to do?'" design director **John Mulkey** says. "What do you like from different games, and can they work together? The in-match levelling was a really cool iteration on RPGs that we saw MOBAs were pulling off. But we've pulled in a lot of things."

The setting for *Battleborn*'s cross-genre experiment is the last star left in the universe. A race of spindly photophobic aliens known as the Varelsi have extinguished all but this one, and survivors from species across the galaxy have convened on its surrounding planets to fight back in fiveplayer co-op and five-against-five competitive play.



Oscar Mike is *Battleborn*'s take on the vanilla FPS grunt: assault rifle in hand, frag grenades at the ready

The MOBA is felt most prominently in the level design, in which arena-like settings are punctuated by more linear areas that give the campaign's narrative time and space to unfold. It's also front and centre when the Helix Menu, a level-up screen presented like a DNA strand, appears – characters level up roughly once a minute during every round, each advance presenting you with a binary choice: do you want faster movement speed or more ammo? Damage or buffs? Then, a minute later, there's another decision to make. It means character growth can be steered in different directions depending on how a round is going, and gives you the chance to identify and fix weaknesses in your team.





FROM TOP **Scott Kester, art director; John Mulkey, design director**

With the game in what Mulkey describes as "pre-pre-alpha", he's reticent to define the longterm progression systems, but they're there, and they bring to mind another possible influence that this time he doesn't vocalise. "At the top, you have a command level – that's your profile. And in your profile you have many Battleborn that you collect. They're your action figures, you know?"

Is it reductive to hear this, drink in the friendly art direction and think of Activision cash cow *Skylanders*? Possibly. The action figures in question are figurative, and as far as Gearbox has mentioned thus far, not part of ▶



Gearbox wants you to see your favourite character archetype from cinema, literature or games within its roster and bond with them on those terms, as evidenced by Thorn, the lithe elven archer





Though the universe's inhabitable area has reduced to the proximity of just one star, the narrative doesn't nix the possibility of environmental variation

a microtransaction ecosystem. But it suggests a desire on the studio's part to bring in a younger audience. Art director **Scott Kester** responds: "I think with this game, I visually wanted to cast the net as big as I could. We didn't want a barrier that would lead people to say, 'No, I don't want my kid to play that.'"

Said child may take a while to grasp *Battleborn*'s metagame, though. "Each of your Battleborn has a character level that raises through earned experience," says Mulkey. "We also have earned currency, through which you can purchase these packs of what we're calling Salvage. So the Wolf Spider thing we destroyed [during the gameplay demo], you would get the head of that as a Salvage where you can rip it open and inside are mods. You can carry a number of those into each combat with your character and apply them to a role.

"There are different tiers of rarity associated with those, and there's a ton to

> ***That's going to be the draw: being the best kunai-slinging fungus on the battlefield***

explore. There's also going to be a crafting system in which you can create those. There's a huge amount of meta-gameplay there." The minute-by-minute levelling seems unlikely to diminish your sense of ownership over a character longterm, then. In fact, it's even possible to unlock Mutations within the Helix Menu that offer different choices as you level.

Would *Street Fighter* diehards recognise their genre's tenets here, as Mulkey suggests? Well, animations are all hand-drawn and designed to emphasise one stance per action, letting you know in an instant whether a teammate just launched a special attack or buffed you. "You know how in fighting games, it's mostly just poses, and a couple of frames between those?" Mulkey asks. "That's the way we approach our characters. Scott goes in and sets up key poses for each character, almost as if it was a fighting game. So it's like, 'Here's the strikes; here's the recoils...' And then we'll build our animations off those key poses."

It's a subtle enough nod that you could play through the campaign and never think of Hadoukens, just as it's conceivable that without having played *Dota 2* or *League Of Legends* you could also mistake the MOBA elements for a hyperactive take on RPG staples. What's unmistakably fresh about *Battleborn* – and thus key to its potential success – is that there's a vast breadth of playstyles possible via its broad cast. Each hero is designed, Mulkey says, as if they were "the main character in their own standalone game". Of the nine revealed so far, taking in the likes of an even more steroidal incarnation of *Team Fortress 2*'s Heavy and a mushroom adept with throwing knives, none appear to borrow each other's animations, attack types or playstyles. That's going to be the draw: being the best kunai-slinging fungus on the battlefield and knowing the particular abilities you offer (each character has three unique powers, plus an Ultimate) can't also be offered by the next guy, barring the circumstance that they're playing as the same character, levelled up in exactly the same way this round, and carrying the exact same Salvage items.

While Gearbox showcases its new game, however, two ghosts of past projects haunt the presentation. By playing a pre-alpha build live in front of journalists and making us aware that mechanics and names might change along the line, the studio wordlessly acknowledges the lessons it learned about transparency from the *Colonial Marines* mess. But there's something else about *Battleborn* that's almost embarrassing to write: it isn't *Borderlands*. This summer, studio head Randy Pitchford suggested that expectations for a third game might now be so high they couldn't possibly be met. To all intents and purposes, no such game is in development. *Battleborn* might be the studio resetting the clock on those expectations, adjusting the formula enough for this to be considered a new project, even if it is one that keeps the foundations of its celebrated series intact. Given the longform leanings of the genres it fuses, it'll take dozens of hours to uncover whether that revised formula is as robust as the one powering *Borderlands*. All we can be certain of is that Gearbox is being careful about what it promises – it knows more than its reputation is on the line this time. ■

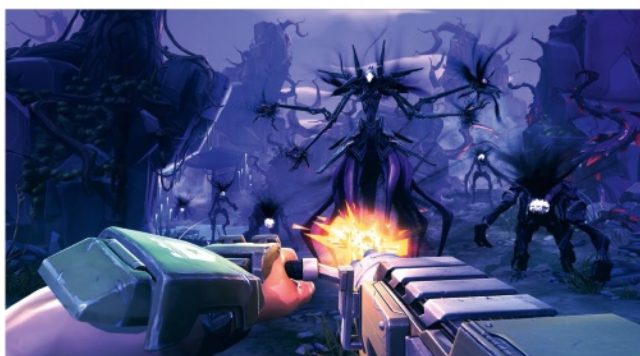


With one of the most disproportionate head-to-body ratios in videogames, Montana's appearance belies his gregarious nature. So far he's hoarding all the best mid-game one-liners, too



The hard cel

Before building *Battleborn*'s art style from the ground up as art director, Scott Kester played a key role in developing *Borderlands*' cel-shaded (or if you're Randy Pitchford, absolutely *not* cel-shaded) visuals, and designed most of the main characters in the first and second games. "I started on *Borderlands 1* before the style change," he says. "We had to redo a bunch of it, but there was a starting point. This one was a challenge, because we started with nothing. We re-used nothing." Could the studio's penchant for radical rethinking affect the work he's done so far on *Battleborn*? "I don't think it's necessarily studio policy to go, 'Hey, it's the 11th hour, let's change everything!' Please, God, I hope!"









TOP LEFT **The Varelsi's many sharp angles seem to bleed plumes of darkness into the air as they encroach on your position. Dip Slender Man in an inkwell and we imagine you'd have the same effect.**
TOP RIGHT **This being a quasi-MOBA, the vast majority of your enemies come in minion form, like these easily dismembered robots.**
MAIN **Melee-centric Rath is art director Scott Kester's personal passion project, so adamant is he on the merits of including a dual-katana-wielding playstyle**





FAR LEFT **The clean art style is as dictated by necessity as emotion – any fussier and all the information presented to you could easily begin to overwhelm the screen.**
LEFT ***Battleborn*'s animations take the idea of *Team Fortress 2*'s instantly legible silhouettes one step further, letting you know what every player's doing via bold poses**

Publisher SCEE
Developer Media Molecule
Format PS4
Origin UK
Release 2015





TEARAWAY UNFOLDED

Bigger, better, more cauliflowers

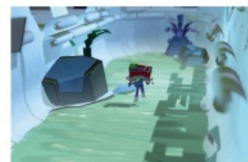
Unfolded's not quite a remake, but nor is it a sequel, and that's far from the only unconventional thing about *Tearaway*'s translation to PS4. Media Molecule certainly has a few unusual ideas about how to use all the extra horsepower the console offers over Vita. "We've got a few levels that have infinite cauliflowers being chucked around," says creative lead **Rex Crowle**, before explaining how the vegetable has fallen out of favour. "They're hard to buy these days," he says sadly. "We're trying to bring them back."

That's entirely in keeping with *Tearaway*'s plucky underdog spirit. Adored by critics but widely overlooked, this inventive papercraft platformer was an ode to the unfashionable, as much a love letter to its host hardware as to the material its world was built from. It's strange, then, to see it being brought to another platform, particularly when Crowle admits "we really wanted it to feel almost like *Tearaway* had always been inside of the Vita, and somehow it was just revealed to you when the game launched".

***Unfolded* came to** be after Media Molecule saw its game on the biggest of big screens on Sony's stage at E3. The boldness of the art held up, and the subtle details and environmental animations were easier to discern across a larger canvas. So the studio knew that visually *Tearaway* would shine on a TV screen, but how would the game itself – and, perhaps more pertinently, its control scheme – translate?

Rather than remapping features, Crowle was keen to take a fresh approach. At first, he invited his team to treat DualShock 4 not as a videogame controller, but as an alien artefact. "Imagine you just found it and [were] trying





LEFT ***Unfolded* will give its players more room to take in their environment, though Crowle is keen to avoid reusing chunks of levels to increase the game's runtime. "We're trying to let each section introduce itself a little bit more, so you feel like you're travelling across this world rather than just jumping from one intense section to the next"**





While the world is larger, you won't be staring at mini-maps or laying waypoint after waypoint. "We spent a long time playing with the scale," Crowle says, "trying to work out what sort of environment we could have with the least amount of interface to explore it with"



Media Molecule's Rex Crowle, creative lead on *Tearaway Unfolded*

to investigate it, and work out what it's for, and you don't necessarily have all the baggage of what it's supposed to be used for."

Crowle says it was equally crucial for players to still feel they were able to influence the game world without being able to directly push their fingers into it, which presented a challenge. Using the DualShock 4 touchpad as a touchscreen replacement made no sense, given the extra degree of separation between the player's digits and the game world, yet the notion of paper moving and transforming in the style of a popup book was considered an essential part of the equation.

The trick to solving this particular dilemma, Crowle explains, was to honestly address the hardware differences and acknowledge the space between the player and the TV screen. "There is [now] a gulf between the character in the world and you outside it, and we've played with that a little more," he says. "That's where one of the core mechanics comes from – the idea that the messenger can pick up items and then throw them out of the game for you to catch in your controller. But obviously, as the game goes on, we want to give that feeling that the distance between the two of you is slowly decreasing, that you're getting closer."

After several early 'feature jams', the new wind mechanic was born. You can use the controller's touchpad to send powerful gusts into the world, parting seas and sending Atoi or Iota – the game's returning pair of envelope-headed player characters – flying through the air. You'll be passing over the same environments as before, but they've been expanded significantly and offer greater rewards to tempt you from the beaten track.

Elsewhere, the controller's light bar can be shone into the world, enabling you to illuminate and investigate darkened areas and to reveal pathways for your messenger to traverse. And yet with the player's almost deific presence in mind, it's much more than just a torch. "There's nothing very heavenly about a giant Maglite," Crowle admits. "I wanted to play up the awe of the world, like in a religious painting where you see the god rays streaming down." Though he's reluctant to reveal all the ways in which the mechanic will be used, it's clear that the game's creatures are set to spend a little more time in the spotlight. Some will be terrified by your godlike influence, while others will relish their chance to show off.

"We wanted to push the comedy element further to bring out more personality"

Meanwhile, the Scraps, *Tearaway*'s impish antagonists, can be hypnotised with the light and then dragged around the screen. It's part of a more playful, slapstick approach to the game's already mild combat that emphasises the reactions of your enemies. "We didn't want to suddenly stick in an *Arkham Asylum*-style combat system," Crowle says, "[but] we wanted to push the comedy element further to bring out more personality in both the characters you're dealing with and the powers you're using on them. So with the Scraps, you can cause a lot more mayhem in their plans, rather than just having to run around picking them up and throwing them off cliffs."

What *Tearaway* loses in intimacy in the translation to Sony's home console, it looks to more than compensate for in character and scope, taking a markedly different route on its way to a familiar destination. It's certainly more than just a simple port, with Crowle and his team evidently keen to make Atoi and Iota feel as much at home within your TV set as they ever were inside a Vita. ■



Shoot the messenger

With the original game using Vita's cameras to great effect, it's no surprise to learn Media Molecule will be supporting PS4's camera peripheral. Those who have it can take photos to use in the game, and the studio has been experimenting with other ideas. "We're using motion tracking so you can wave [at Atoi] and she'll wave back at you," Crowle explains. "I really enjoy games where it feels like you have a magical connection to it even when you're not pressing any buttons." Crowle also teases nontraditional co-op, saying the team is looking into creative and collaborative ways for others to influence your world while you're playing.



Crowle fondly acknowledges past 3D platformers like Rare's *StarFox Adventures* as a key influence. "[They're] just really nice worlds to settle into and return to"



Publisher Sega
Developer Sonic Team
Format PS4, Xbox One
Origin Japan
Release December 4



PUYO PUYO TETRIS

Sonic Team proves two puzzlers can be better than one

Tetris is arguably the best puzzle game yet made: its premise is simplicity itself, its endless nature and lack of win state as compulsive as gaming gets. *Puyo Puyo* is better known in Japan than the west, but its rules are equally straightforward (match four coloured blobs) and its appeal as universal.

Developed by Sonic Team, *Puyo Puyo Tetris* is a fusion with a wealth of play modes, including standalone versions of each game. These are available to play solo or in matches of up to four players, locally or online, with each selecting their puzzler of choice. Score big with T-spins, back-to-back combos or perfect clears to dump junk blocks on your foes' grids, pushing them towards a game over.

But the two most absorbing modes are the ones that ask you to play both titles at once.

There's an arcade madness to it that can be ludicrously difficult but highly rewarding

Puyo-Tet-Mix mode merges them onto one play grid: your next block may be a four-square tetrimino or a two-blob puyo, the former filling up the screen as it lands at the bottom, with the latter resting on top of your stack. Falling tetriminoes temporarily dislodge any puyos in their path with a satisfying squidge, but puyos reappear atop the landed blocks. This lends the game an extra layer of strategy, since the puyos' new location may well line them up with others of the same colour, prompting a new chain, while any junk blobs squashed by the tetriminoes disappear completely. The biggest points come from sparking a mixed chain of the two types of blocks with a single move.

Balancing both sets of puzzles in Puyo-Tet-Mix mode requires focus, but Swap mode demands even more. Here the grid alternates between *Tetris* and *Puyo Puyo* games at timed intervals, requiring you to remember what is happening in both and strategise accordingly. There's a frantic arcade madness to it that can be ludicrously difficult but highly rewarding.

In Big Bang mode, the player must fill gaps on a prerendered *Tetris* board with like-shaped tetriminoes (Lucky Attack) or find the right spot on a *Puyo Puyo* board to trigger a combo chain that will clear all the blobs in one go (Fever Mode), all with the pressure of a ticking timer. Moving quickly means clearing more stages before time runs out.

Fortunately, there's a comprehensive set of tutorials to help you get your head around it all, offering beginner and advanced tips for these game types. Finally, there's a story mode, in which anthropomorphised *Tetris* and *Puyo Puyo* characters proffer challenges such as clearing a specified number of lines within a set time, reaching a certain number of points, or simply beating the CPU opponent.

The package is presented in bold colours with a chunky cartoon style, and character voices egg players on and call out the names of special moves as though it were a fighting game, lending an action-like sheen that suits a competitive play session. The inclusion of a new version of the classic *Tetris* theme music, based on Russian folk song Korobeiniki, is an additional sonic treat.

By mixing together two classic puzzle games, Sonic Team has somehow managed to find ways to improve upon them both, with modes to suit newcomers and hardcore fans alike. And yet while Ubisoft's *Tetris Ultimate* prepares to land on several platforms and in every territory to mark the series' 30th anniversary, Sega's title currently remains confined to Japan only, a situation as puzzling as any number of mismatched blocks.

Still, the intuitive mechanics and minimal reliance on text make *Puyo Puyo Tetris* an easy import, and with versions already out for 360 PS3, Wii U, Vita and 3DS, plus PS4 and Xbox One versions soon to drop, it should slot neatly into any player's library. ■



Mental blocks

Since little coloured blobs or four-block shapes don't have much personality, in *Puyo Puyo Tetris* they have been anthropomorphised into cute cartoon characters, each with their own backstory. These include J and L as manifestations of the *Tetris* pieces of those shapes, so easily confused for one another during play and thus rendered here as twins. There's also I, a cowardly but smart dog who bizarrely is the *Tetris* spaceship crew's engineer. There's a plot, too: the *Tetris* characters have fallen from the sky (of course) into the puyos' world, and a rivalry between them spurs many story mode challenges, though everyone seems to tessellate pretty well eventually.











TOP LEFT **Online play is a major part of the package, with delight to be found in duelling a worthy opponent.** TOP **The excellent Puyo-Tet-Mix mode has you playing both games at once, with *Tetris* blocks lining up on the bottom rows and *Puyo Puyo* blobs above them.** ABOVE **Play well and you'll shower garbage blocks onto the opposition's grids, pushing them ever closer towards failure**

MAIN **Big Bang mode presents timed puzzle challenges, either triggering a predetermined chain on a *Puyo Puyo* grid or clearing set stacks with specific tetriminoes on a *Tetris* one.** RIGHT **Up to four players can compete in matches at once, selecting their choice of *Tetris* or *Puyo Puyo* playstyle**





Publisher/developer Iridium Studios
Format PC, Xbox One
Origin US
Release 2014



THERE CAME AN ECHO

Iridium Studios is making realtime strategy more personal

Alternative control schemes have rather fallen from grace since Microsoft's Kinect proposition flopped and the device received a demotion back to peripheral status. It's a trend **Jason Wishnov**, lead designer on voice-controlled RTS *There Came An Echo*, is keenly aware of, though he faults the implementations, not the central idea.

"The games that have used alternative control schemes haven't tended to have the depth, narrative or gameplay experience that core gamers, or whatever you want to call them, have come to expect," he says. "I mean, name a Kinect title that has the precision and depth of a game like *Bayonetta 2*, a modern FPS, or anything really. The games that tend to come out are exercise games, *Dance Central*, or that Sesame Street game by Double Fine – all of which are pretty fun, but they're not something that's going to appeal to a large segment of the traditional gamer population. So I'm trying to break the mould; I'm trying to legitimise an alternative control scheme as something that's OK for a game that hopefully has quite a bit of depth. But it's an uphill battle, and a difficult perception challenge."



Jason Wishnov, lead designer at Iridium

On early evidence, the Iridium team might just be on track to overturn the common perception. While we initially had some problems with characters not responding to orders in the alpha build, last-minute tweaks to the game's British accent recognition delivered an immeasurable improvement. And when *There Came An Echo*'s systems coalesce, the effect is wondrous.

Characters can be ordered by name, or you can tell "everybody" or "everybody but" to do something. You can also ask your charges to swap between their weapons – a standard pistol and one of four special guns, which include a sniper rifle and a grenade launcher – and change batteries, which power both special weapons and shields. Plus, you can add "on my mark" to synchronise your commands before booming "mark" into the mic like you're starring in an action thriller.



This helicopter is piloted by the sarcastic Adam. It's used early on in the game to extract Corrin and Miranda after the former learns a mysterious organisation wants to use his encryption algorithm for nefarious ends

While *There Came An Echo* isn't the first game to use voice commands to control troops – *Tom Clancy's EndWar* and *Odama* preceded it – it's a more intimate one thanks to its much tighter focus, resulting in a more personal relationship between you and those you're ordering into the firing line.

"I've always been a huge fan of narrative in games," Wishnov says. "I think *EndWar* missed a really great opportunity. In that game, you were just ordering these generic army soldier guys – you didn't really feel much for them and it didn't matter if they died. But with *There Came An Echo*, I really wanted to reinforce that relationship and make you care about the characters. You're responsible for their welfare, and if they die, it's probably your fault."

Thankfully, fallen comrades can be revived with a burst of electricity, while the forcefields that surround each fighter will take a reasonable amount of punishment before giving in. Cover further bolsters your team's chances of survival, offering a defensive bonus by reducing enemy accuracy.

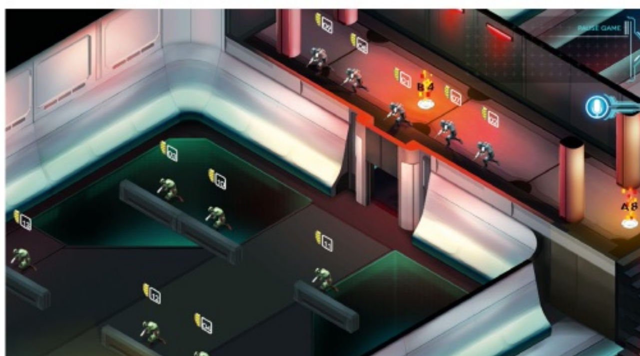
"It's a fine balance to want to strike," Wishnov explains. "If you've lined up your soldiers in an optimal position, and the enemy soldiers have done the same, then you'd theoretically just sit there as bullets fly back and forth, and that's pretty boring. So we're trying to achieve this feeling of urgency, but at the same time we couldn't make it too intense – like, say, *StarCraft* – because you're inherently limited in your actions per minute due to the speed of voice."

Those orders will be delivered even more slowly if the kind of creative swearing born of unresponsive controls is ever a factor, and while traditional inputs are supported, *There Came An Echo* clearly depends on its vocal interface being near flawless. But when you're barking at agents to flank the enemy and it's all working as planned, it's uncommonly easy to get swept up in the moment. ■



Long shadow

While *There Came An Echo* looks like a 2D isometric setup in screenshots, it blends 2D backgrounds with 3D geometry. "The environments in the game are actually all hand-painted 2D sprites," Wishnov explains. "But then we create 3D geometry and make it invisible – it's completely invisible unless light is being cast upon it, or in the absence of light to create shadow. Then that's placed very precisely in front of the sprite in an orthographic camera to show the 2D sprite but still have the lighting and shadows fall correctly on the structure. So it creates a pseudo-3D effect."



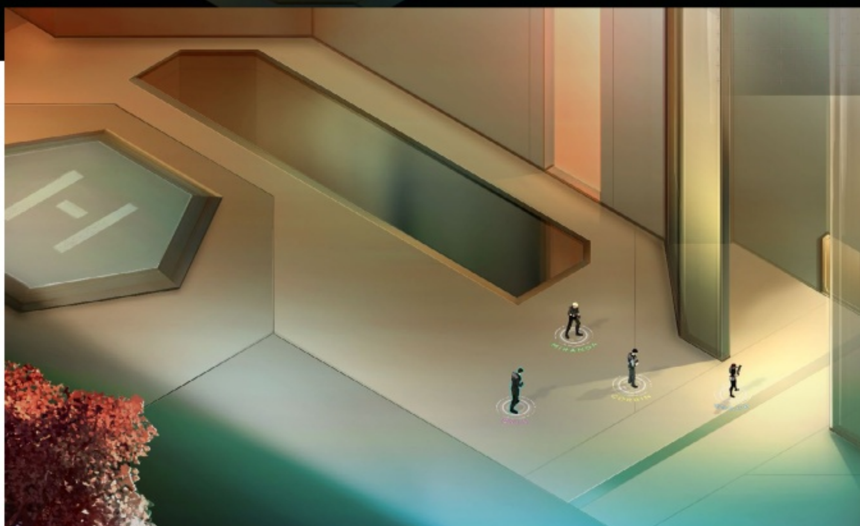








TOP Enemies' health is displayed as a green bar above their heads. They're also assigned numbers so you can order your team to focus fire on a chosen unit. RIGHT You can zoom in and out with the mouse, or an Xbox 360 controller, to get a better view of the area, though the game often takes control of the camera for the in-engine cutscenes



TOP The first mission in the game, which feels like a cross between the Matrix and Bourne films, requires you to guide Corrin through an office block as you avoid the men sent to kill him. ABOVE Preceding your order with "everybody" allows you to quickly instruct groups, but your team members can be individually ordered too. MAIN You're restricted to ordering units to highlighted waypoints on the map. It doesn't feel as restrictive as it may seem, however, and they're usually sensibly placed throughout the levels





ROUNDUP

CAPTAIN TOAD: TREASURE TRACKER

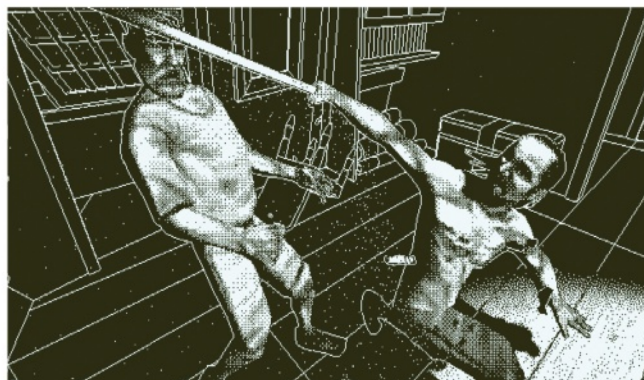
Publisher/developer Nintendo (EAD Tokyo) **Format** Wii U **Origin** Japan **Release** Out now (JP), December 5 (US), January 9 (EU)



After a diverting cameo in *Super Mario 3D World*, EAD Tokyo's intrepid adventurer gets a mid-priced game of his very own. It follows a similar format to his *3D World* stages: you guide the Captain with the left stick and rotate the worlds he explores with the right one, shifting your perspective to tease out hidden secrets en route to a power star at the end of the course. Each stage also has three gems to locate and an additional objective to encourage repeat plays. Handsome and unhurried, this solo outing is perhaps a little too straightforward in its early stages, though we're confident the challenge will steepen later on.

RETURN OF THE OBRA DINN

Publisher/developer Lucas Pope **Format** PC **Origin** Japan **Release** TBA



A world away from *Papers, Please*, Pope's next game is a firstperson mystery set aboard a 19th century merchant ship. A short playable section from an early build sees you investigating the corpse-strewn craft, using a pocket watch to rewind time to the moment of each character's death. Its '1bit' art style is as distinctive as its sound design is evocative, and with splendid voice work even at this early stage, it's a teaser that makes us keen to discover more.

WHERE THE WATER TASTES LIKE WINE

Publisher/developer Dim Bulb Games **Format** PC **Origin** US **Release** TBC



Having spent his time as programmer on *Gone Home* coding interiors, Johnnemann Nordhagen's next project is heading outdoors. A road trip of sorts, it's an adventure about sharing stories with fellow travellers while creating your own, with backpacking, Steinbeck, Kerouac and Twain as influences.

EVOLVE

Publisher 2K **Developer** Turtle Rock Studios **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** US **Release** February 10 (EU)



2K's 'Big Alpha' could have gone better. After matchmaking issues and a delay for PS4 owners after issues with firmware 2.0, the trial run will have discouraged many whose interest was aroused by glowing E3 reports. And the game itself? Entertaining but unbalanced. Turtle Rock has work to do.

AXIOM VERGE

Publisher SCE **Developer** Tom Happ **Format** PC, PS4, Vita **Origin** US **Release** 2015



Happ has spent five years' worth of evenings and weekends working on this 16bit-style sidescroller, which aims to put a contemporary spin on its timeworn *Metroid* template. You'll glitch through walls and drill through blocks, while using an expansive arsenal to deal with imposing and repulsive bosses.

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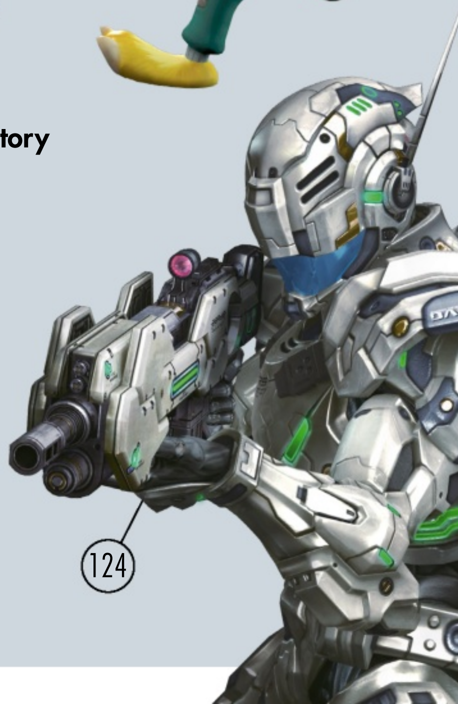
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S P A C E

Game *Star Citizen*
Format PC
Publisher/developer Cloud Imperium Games
Release TBC

C R A F T

Chris Roberts has gigantic ambition and the most successful crowdfunding campaign in history behind him. What is he doing with it?

By Matt Clapham



On the edge of known space, we centre the object in our meteor-scratched canopy and hit the thrusters. In time, it begins to loom large in our vision, monolithic and yet somehow indistinct, its obsidian, almost too perfect alien surface melding into the pervading blackness. Clearly it's colossal, but it's also beguilingly mysterious. Yet the problem isn't really a lack of information: early probes have returned full of data, it's just that much of it is apparently contradictory and there's plenty of disagreement over what it all means. The object is *Star Citizen*, and the only conclusion everyone seems truly happy with is that it's made a hell of a lot of money.

That could not be more perfectly calculated to wind up **Chris Roberts**, the creator of the beloved *Wing Commander* series, CEO of Cloud Imperium Games and chief creative officer on *Star Citizen*. "I do get a bit disappointed," he admits. "I mean, it's today's news cycle… If you're on the online 24/7 game blog, they don't have time to [do in-depth articles], so they're always about the headline. So for them it's like, 'Oh, *Star Citizen*'s made X million or X million,' and everything focuses on the money. And then you can read it and say, 'Well, all they care about is the money.' Not really."

"RIGHT NOW I THINK WE'RE ESTIMATING SOMETHING LIKE 50 HOURS TO PLAY THROUGH THE FULL NARRATIVE STORY"

It is the distorting weight of $60m and counting, raised by some 640,000 backers, which has seen the developer variously accused of running a cult, a scam and, thanks to the $30 to $15,000 game packages on the Roberts Space Industries site, a pay-to-win operation. Alternatively, for the faithful, this is the second coming of Chris Roberts after a ten-year break from games. But *Star Citizen*'s even harder to get a read on: it's a space dogfighting game, only with ships big enough to walk around and live in, except when it's an FPS, set in an online universe.

The list of features defies credulity, but if *Star Citizen* is a con, it might be the worst-run one on the planet. For starters, it's intensely public, with Chris often making appearances on game expo stages to reveal more in-engine footage. Secondly, while only a sliver of what's promised, the dogfighting and hangar modules are both in public hands already, the former the beneficiary of a huge update in recent weeks (see 'Reality engine'). Some 110 Cloud Imperium staff have accounts on LinkedIn, and these are not sock puppets, but people who have portfolio sites and histories at Crytek, BioWare and Activision. As slight as accountability in crowdfunding projects may be, the conspiracy theory doesn't stack up.

Chris refutes the pay-to-win accusations himself: "The design of the game, and this is just personal preference, because I hate it in free-to-play games, is there's nothing that you can buy with money that you can't earn in the game." The packages are pledge tiers, their values set to offer funding options. Come release, the basic starting package is all you'll need.

The problem for outside observers is really scale. Baffling, mind-boggling scale. "We're essentially giving them four huge games all in one," Chris explains. "Squadron 42 is going to be what, or better than what, a next-generation *Wing Commander* would have been, and that's just by itself. And its level of fidelity – I mean, the scope and the size of the story and the missions we're doing in it is huge. I mean, I'm pretty sure if I was doing another *Wing Commander* for EA, I don't think they would allow me to do as much content. Because right now I think we're estimating something like 50 hours or so to play through the full narrative story.

"I mean, it's so big we're going to release it in episodes. Think of it as a miniseries, like five episodes. So the first episode is what we're going to release next year – well, hopefully there are two





FROM TOP **Chris Roberts is chief creative officer on *Star Citizen* and the co-founder of Cloud Imperium Games; Erin Roberts is studio director of Foundry 42, which is creating the singleplayer campaign**



LEFT **Every ship is astonishingly detailed, and built to work under physical laws.** BELOW **In-cockpit furnishing is no less exacting. The two expanded Arena Commander maps – with star-hearted rock and orbital platform centrepieces – show off the dynamic lighting**





episodes next year, but for the first one I think we're aiming for Gamescom. But the first episode itself is about ten hours of gameplay. So compared to modern FPS games, that's more than you get in most of the campaign modes with a *Call Of Duty*.

"And then, of course, there's whole persistent [online] universe. You've got the 4X space game style, because if you don't want to get into combat, you can go into building a business up or building a trade empire and doing all that kind of stuff. And then we've got the FPS section. So someone could make a game just by itself from any one of these."

Ambition of this scale takes not one studio, but five, each working on separate modules of the game. While Chris heads up development on the persistent universe in Los Angeles, CIG also has satellites in Texas and California. IllFonic, a relatively unknown quantity whose output includes the lukewarmly received *Nexuiz*, is in charge of the FPS module. Rather more promisingly, **Erin Roberts** is studio director of the Manchester-based Foundry 42, entrusted with creating the singleplayer campaign, Squadron 42. Unlike his brother, Erin never left the industry, but after producing *Wing Commander:* ▶

WHACK PLANET

"Originally, [landing on planets] was more like *Freelancer* or *Privateer*," says Chris, "where you landed to fix your ship or buy new equipment or buy a new ship or get missions – like a glorified shopping and mission interface. Whereas now we're on a very capable firstperson engine, so there's a lot more you can do. We're starting to look at PvE. I don't want you to go to the planet and think, 'Oh, I'm in a PvP gankfest...' because I think that would be fairly stressful. There'll be some areas in space where people will feel like that, but that's OK because you can maybe avoid those areas. Planets should be more of a safe haven. But that doesn't mean the environment or NPCs themselves don't interact with you, and couldn't also potentially be dangerous. So if you land on a rough-and-tumble planet on the edge of UEE space, and go down a dark alleyway to go in this back room to do a deal to get a mission, potentially a couple of NPC muggers could try to take you out. So you can whip out your gun, Han Solo-style, shoot them, and go about your day."

REALITY ENGINE

The dogfighting module, AKA Arena Commander, is one part testbed for the developers, but it's also a bottle universe for generating community feedback. While version 0.9.1 gave pilots a feel for the Newtonian physics and fly-by-wire systems that underpin *Star Citizen*'s flight model, it was clinical and overzealous in its simulation, with clumsy fine control and a targeting HUD that felt like chasing boxes in space rather than deadly opponents. The 0.9.2 update is a spectacular improvement. Targeting has been entirely reworked, with a cleaner HUD and the game now generating projected impact points from either your viewpoint or fixed gun reticle to align with foes, the emphasis restored to watching enemies and reading their moves. Fine control is also improved, a predictive system deadening stick inputs a little when you're lining up a target to provide granular control. The result is a flight system that not only affords a sense of real momentum and simulates g-force to the extent that fast turns with the safeties off will cause you to black or red out, but is taught and exciting. It's a promising sign for other modules and *Star Citizen*'s overall path to a cohesive, entertaining universe.







Privateer 2 and helming *Starlancer*, he wound up at TT Fusion making *Lego* games. Though he enjoyed it, he took little convincing to rejoin his brother to make Chris's self-professed "crazy dream".

Erin's part is certainly the easiest to contextualise. Taking place before the timeline of the persistent universe, Squadron 42's arc tells the story of a war between the alien Vanduul and United Empire of Earth (UEE). The setup is battle-worn: you'll play the rookie working your way up the ranks. You start with a light fighter, the Gladius, waiting in your hangar, earning the right to fly more advanced craft over time. But Erin explains there's been a gestalt shift that defines *Star Citizen*; *Wing Commander* has long been famous for its firstperson view on the cockpit, but pilots here will be free to tear open the canopy and stretch their legs. "It's not, for me, really a space combat game," he says. "It's actually an FPS game where you use vehicles. So, 'cause you're always a person, you [might] decide to fly a ship, get in a ground vehicle, or go places and walk around."

So while the storyline's linear, moment-to-moment gameplay is anything but dictatorial. Ronald D Moore's Battlestar Galactica is namechecked before Erin describes 1km long battlecruisers with explorable interiors, and how ships are modelled down to the latrines and manufacturer's marks on the rivets. It seems one such capital ship will serve as a hub and home for a time, with you at liberty to wander its cafeterias and halls between spells in the cockpit.

The idea is to give a sense of a living place, so the people on board are just as important as the immaculately rendered bulwarks. Crews will assemble in the canteen at lunch, then scuttle off to service hangar craft, and key NPCs will catch your eye if they want a quick chat. Dialogue option lists are out, a body language and reputation system in their place. Stay and listen to a garrulous wingman's tall tales in a bar and he might form a closer bond with you that means more help out among the stars; get him going and dash off mid-sentence and he might give you the cold shoulder instead.

"I mean, it's crazy," says Chris, "because the *Wing Commander* format was that you fly your mission in space, shoot a bunch of stuff up, and then you come back onto the ship, you have some conversations and the story advances, and you basically rinse and repeat that. This is not like that. It's completely fluid. You can be going around your ship, having conversations, and suddenly there's an attack. Vanduul have boarded and you've got to run to the armoury to get your weapons to go fend them off, and then fight your way to the flight deck. And then you get in your ship and take it out, and chase after the Vanduul and destroy them."

This, Erin explains, is the direct benefit of all that overfunding. "It allows us to really push a bunch of stuff we weren't planning to do originally. If it just stayed very small at the beginning, then [Squadron 42] would have very much been just a smaller, much more focused space thing. The sort of way *Elite: Dangerous* is going about things, I guess." That's not to disparage David Braben's own return to the genre – Chris is a backer, as are many of the Manchester team – but *Star Citizen* has the funds to expand its focus.

"One of the big locations in the game is a huge mining base," Erin tells us, "and it's like 6km, well, 'big'. It's huge. It's got 26 landing platforms on it which can fit large ships – I mean, like big old transports and things like that – and each of these locations are places you can go."

"IT'S NOT, FOR ME, REALLY A SPACE COMBAT GAME. IT'S ACTUALLY AN FPS GAME WHERE YOU USE VEHICLES"

It's not simply physical scale, either. Across the hour we spend with Erin, he touches tantalisingly on the topics of dropships to fly, popping out in your EVA suit to perform mid-mission spacewalks to get around problems, and calling for air support from inside a location. It sounds like mad overpromising until you consider that PAX Australia gave the world its first glimpse of *Star Citizen*'s considered, tactical gunplay before capping it off with a less constrained zero-g shootout, soldiers and pirates locked in an aerial ballet as they pushed off from walls and dodged floating crates. Perhaps most attractively of all, because many of Squadron 42's systems have hooks in the persistent universe, they have been built to work in dynamic, unscripted environments, not just for setpieces. A linear tale may deploy them that way, but Erin stresses the primacy of choice.

Yet the power to choose may mean you never experience his work: in the final release, the entire Squadron 42 campaign will be optional. Still, according to Erin, you can opt out more dramatically than clicking 'no thanks' after character creation. "We're going to give you the ability to pretty much mutiny. So you may decide you're going to be an evil pirate, and you go and shoot your captain in the back of the head and make an escape… Obviously that puts an end to the campaign for you." ▶



Bjorn Seinstra, lead vehicle artist and environment artist











MARQUE TARGETS

Star Citizen's economy is deep, and affects more than just the look of planets. The dedication to realism means a web of in-universe goods makers, each with their own personality and aesthetic. "I think we have about – not just ships but all manufacturers – I think there's about 400 or 500 manufacturers in total," lead vehicle artist **Bjorn Seinstra** explains.

Take weapons maker Behring. "Behring is a very old company. They used to make high-end weapons, but they got outgunned by the newer companies. So they kind of stick to the more classic-looking stuff. It works – why change it? While other companies like Gallenson have more of a futuristic look – they try new techniques."

Such equipment is the next phase for ship-to-ship combat, following the *Elite* model of an arms race between sensors and emissions – energy and heat here – that will determine who can be seen on the radar, and who must be eyeballed. In a wing of friends, however, you might outfit one ship as a detector, with the others ready for the hunt.

These choice-based systems are set to reach maturation in the persistent universe, which blends a game-shaping economy simulation with a massively multiplayer sandbox universe. Yet as you explore its 110 star systems, and around 400 planned landing locations, you should notice them free of tired old MMOG design. "I kind of feel like in a lot of online games, especially as you get to the higher levels, you get forced into a social dynamic," says Chris. "OK, I'm 80th level in *World Of Warcraft* and I've got to be in my raid group… We don't have levels in *Star Citizen*. I don't want that. The goal of the game is there shouldn't be any win, right? Because it's like in the real world: what's your definition of a win?"

Your interpretation could mean seeking out dogfights until you carve out a legend as a combat ace, but it could equally mean starting up a junking and salvage business to make a few credits. Chris wants every path to involve skill, with mining, for instance, more a case of identifying mineral seams and extracting them, rather than floating near a rock and holding the spacebar.

So how will it all work? On a technical level, the universe itself is designed to cater to hundreds of thousands of players – and millions more NPCs, the ratio being one human to nine AI characters – but a game server can only contain 50 to 100 craft at this level of graphical fidelity. Instead of dealing with this via shards, space will be dynamically instanced, those instances stacking on top of each other as the player count in an area rises. Smartly, however, whenever you drop out of warp, an algorithm will be making decisions about who to stick you with based on your in-game affiliations and reputation, and your personal preferences. Express an interest in PvP and you're likely to be matched with humans. Eschew social contact and pirates in your instance will more likely be AI bots. In this way, *Star Citizen* invisibly tailors itself to you as much as your actions alter it.

And alter it you will, entangled as you are in the web that is the economy simulation, which acts to imbue the universe with consequence and create a steady flow of missions. Chris provides the example of a factory in need of raw goods. To start with, it will post a mission to the job board that's for simple haulage. Players get first dibs, but an NPC trucker will step in as time passes. If the sector's lawless enough to attract pirates, the factory may soon be cut off and, as the bottom line is affected, the factory's owner may then seek to hire mercenaries to protect their shipments. If that doesn't work, then you could be looking at a bounty to bring back the troublesome pirate lord's scalp. But fail to reverse the factory's fortunes and the workers will start to be laid off, crime rises and the area deteriorates visually, a wear-and-tear system responding to local affluence.

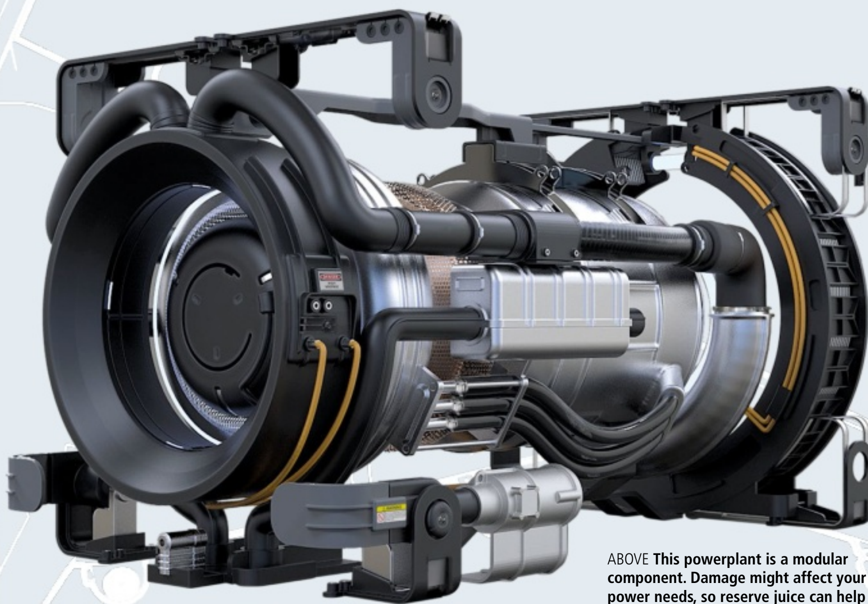
Planetside scenarios are said to evolve equally organically, with Chris's team of designers working on modular mission templates so that the universe will keep providing things to see and do long after its scripted content is exhausted. And it is here that the bamboozling scope finally begins to feel grounded. Cloud Imperium may be crafting every ship by hand, but it isn't trying to build a universe this densely packed via raw manpower alone.

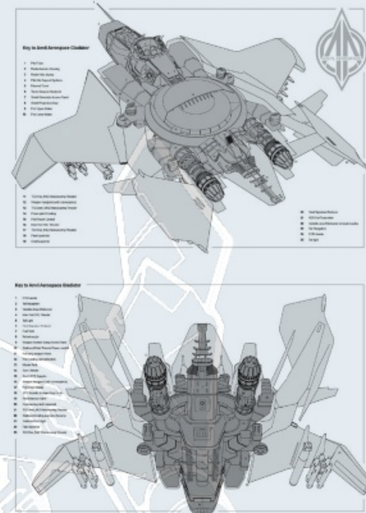
But such an emphasis on a bespoke, hand-shaped approach has introduced limits. "It's not necessarily as big as a procedural game like *Elite* or *No Man's Sky* that's doing a lot more procedural stuff, because there's a slightly different focus," says Chris. "We're focused on a more crafted, detailed-oriented approach. Even in what I'm describing, there's still procedural stuff that goes on in building elements of the cities, just because they're so big and we're doing them in such high fidelity. Like, for instance, if you're in a big city, the background city blocks and everything is all much more procedural versus an artist placing down each single building."

CLOUD IMPERIUM ISN'T TRYING TO BUILD A UNIVERSE THIS DENSELY PACKED VIA RAW MANPOWER ALONE

With all these promises to keep, is Chris feeling the pressure of his literally invested fanbase? Well, no. "The toughest person is myself on myself. The person that would be most annoyed if I didn't do what I have this vision in my head for is myself. When I really see a game through, I have this picture in my mind and I'm really obsessed about getting to this point. The original *Wing Commander* was that way, and that's where I'm at on this. I'm stubborn."

What Chris asks of his fans now is the same stubbornness: to bear with him while he, Erin and the team realise his grand vision, piece by piece. With so much riding on it – no more or less than the reputation of crowdfunding whales – *Star Citizen* can only either succeed spectacularly or fail disastrously. No publisher would take this kind of risk, but a great number of PC enthusiasts have, perhaps seeking release from an industry driven by predictable cycles and modest yearly iterations. Whatever *Star Citizen* ends up being, it will shake the game industry, and that alone makes it worth further exploration. ■





ABOVE **This powerplant is a modular component. Damage might affect your power needs, so reserve juice can help**

TOP RIGHT **The Gladiator is a torpedo boat and space-to-ground dive bomber that can withstand a vast amount of punishment.**
FAR RIGHT **Not all ships in *Star Citizen* are military single-seaters. Several vessels require more than one pair of hands, and can be manned by a group of friends or a hired NPC crew**

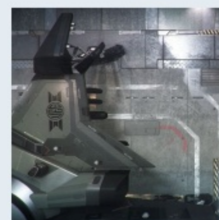
RIGHT **An Ironman mode is planned for advanced pilots, where death is final and means restarting the campaign. The persistent universe has permadeath, too, but only after you amass critical injuries.**
BELOW **The Gladius is a short-range patrol fighter, once mass produced but coming to the end of its life. There are two variants: stealth and a military spec version with extra armour**











ABOVE **The UEE Navy is the symbol of human might in the cosmos. Your service in the campaign should earn you a UEE citizenship.**
LEFT **Artists have to become engineers for *Star Citizen*. Every thruster is placed due to real-world physical principles, and there's no room for cheating for the sake of aesthetics**

PLAYSTATION:
THE STORY BEHIND THE BRAND



Two decades on from its launch in Japan, it's time to look at how Sony's first game console transformed an industry

BY SIMON PARKIN AND EDGE STAFF



In June 1991, at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, Sony announced its first videogame console. The 'Play Station', as the system was to be called, was a joint venture with Nintendo, a power marriage that would carry both companies into the emerging world of multimedia entertainment. The following day, the marriage fell apart, with Nintendo declaring that it was terminating its deal with Sony in order to partner with rival manufacturer Philips. It was a public snub the like of which Sony had not experienced before. The following month, the company's president, Norio Ohga, called a meeting in Tokyo.

Ohga explained to his staff that a lawsuit and financial recompense would not be enough to sate his appetite for revenge against Nintendo. He rose to his feet. "We will never withdraw from this business," he declared to the room, which included among its occupants Ken Kutaragi, an ex-Nintendo contractor who had long harboured a desire to design a videogame console. "Keep going," Ohga urged his staff.

In this sense, Sony's PlayStation, launched in Japan on December 3, 1994, was a console built upon a grudge. Without Nintendo's duplicity, it's unlikely that Sony's executives, already unsure of whether the company should enter the videogame business, would have funded the system. But while a desire for revenge was the motivating factor at the beginning, this alone wouldn't have been enough to launch a system that went on to sell 102 million units, or to support a vision that did so much to define the 3D era of videogames. How, then, did it happen?



THE PLAN

Ken Kutaragi, supported by Ohga, drew together a team of engineers from across Sony. A large part of the group was comprised of people who had been working on a 3D graphics engine designed to augment live television broadcasts with 3D images, a technology dubbed System-G. Their expertise in 3D image processing would prove invaluable to the console's design.

By June 1992, all relations with Nintendo had been severed and Kutaragi presented his work to Ohga and a small number of other Sony executives. At the meeting, Kutaragi told his bosses his plan to create a proprietary CD-ROM-based system that could render 3D graphics specifically for playing videogames – not multimedia. The rest of the board opposed the idea.

When Ohga enquired as to what kind of architecture such a machine would require, Kutaragi reported a figure of one million gate arrays, ten times the number in any other Sony product at the time. As Ohga reeled at the figure, Kutaragi said, shrewdly: "Are you going to sit back and accept what Nintendo did to us?" Ohga replied: "There's no hope of making further progress with a Nintendo-compatible 16bit machine. Let's chart our own course."





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE RIGHT **PlayStation architect Ken Kutaragi; Phil Harrison wields a distinctive black PS1 game disc; the original Sony console design**







PHIL HARRISON

FORMER PRESIDENT, SCE WORLDWIDE STUDIOS; NOW A CORPORATE VP AT MICROSOFT

Ken Kutaragi brought together a handful of engineers that had come out of a broadcast and professional realtime 3D graphics engine called System-G. Technologically, that's not really a million miles away from videogames, but this was a super-high-end workstation. And Ken's big vision was to take that, apply it in high volume, and bring it into the home.

But there was a huge resistance inside the company to actually being in the videogames business at all. The main reason why the Sony brand wasn't really used in the early marketing of PlayStation was not necessarily out of choice – it was because Sony's old guard was scared that it was going to destroy this wonderful, venerable, 50-year-old brand. They saw Nintendo and Sega as toys, so why on Earth would they join the toy business? That changed a bit after we delivered 90 per cent of the company's profit for a few years.

CHRIS DEERING

FORMER PRESIDENT, SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT EUROPE

PlayStation was special because Ken Kutaragi and Ohga-san designed the division as a pure play rather than a product line of Sony's traditional hardware division or the Sony Entertainment division. It was a uniquely superior product, allowed to grow from within with our own culture. There were almost no politics internally, and minimal politics with other Sony companies.

Ken Kutaragi was the hardest-working person in the company, and so passionate that he would drive us to amazing heights of achievement that we didn't believe possible, even after the system came out. I remember coming back from Tokyo meetings and saying to the team: "You won't believe this, but Ken told us to double our sales targets even though we don't have the manufacturing capacity to deliver them." Kutaragi would then tell the factories: "Europe wants twice as much as their initial forecast. Are you going to let them down?" It was brilliant. Without the passion and the energy of the Japanese HQ, it just would not have been possible to be so special.

MARTIN EDMONDSON

CO-CREATOR OF *DESTRUCTION DERBY* AND *DRIVER*, AND FOUNDER OF REFLECTIONS

We were lucky enough to be one of the very few independent teams working on the PlayStation hardware before it was released, even before anyone really knew anything about the system. The fact that PlayStation doubled as a CD player made it infinitely more publisher-friendly than the dreadful cartridge era that preceded it. CDs were cheap to produce, and you ordered exactly how many you thought you wanted, but you could then add more in double-quick time if sales took off. It was perfect.

ED FRIES
FORMER VICE PRESIDENT OF GAME PUBLISHING AT MICROSOFT, AND CO-FOUNDER OF THE XBOX TEAM
In my opinion, the smartest move that Sony made with its plan for the system was in its decision to move away from cartridges to CDs. It was far better for game creators and publishers alike simply because CDs were much faster and cheaper to manufacture. That meant there was less guessing about how many copies a title might sell in advance and less risk of being stuck with a warehouse full of expensive returns.

PHIL HARRISON
It was a massive shift in the economics. The working-capital requirement shifted massively in favour of the developer and publisher, and they could afford to put more money into product development and marketing, so it was a virtuous circle.

Even so, we had to work hard to demonstrate our credibility, because bringing hardware to market is one thing, but being an organisation to market and distribute and sell it is another. A lot of the business questions related to what the business model was for a publisher, what the royalty rates would be, and how we'd make and distribute the software. That was set against the backdrop of the incumbent business models of Sega and Nintendo, which were at the time very restrictive. They've changed now, but at the time, publishing on 16bit Nintendo was an expensive and risky proposition.

All the publishers we worked with in Japan said that they loved the machine and were all super-excited, but wondered how they'd bring their software to market. This was where the partnership between Sony Corp and Sony Music really came to fruition. Sony invited all the game publishers and developers to a hotel in Tokyo in 1994 and paraded on a stage the 40 direct sales people it had in place to distribute software. It said: "We know this is a challenge for you, so we've gone ahead and built our own sales force." The net effect was that there were hundreds and hundreds of thirdparty publishers in Japan. Tons and tons of product being developed for PlayStation – with the resulting dynamic range of quality.







FROM TOP **The very first PS1 hardware (albeit an empty shell) to reach the Edge office; *Resident Evil* director Shinji Mikami describes working with PS1 for the first time as being like given a bigger canvas; Sony's Teiyu Goto has been responsible for the product design of every PlayStation to date**

THE DESIGN

Kutaragi's decision to create a system that incorporated a CD drive was significant. Now game makers could include prerecorded soundtracks and prerendered movies, creative flourishes that would nudge the medium closer to the Hollywood aesthetic, with all of the cultural cachet that brought. This was further aided by the shift in focus from 2D graphics to realtime 3D.

This wasn't, however, always the plan. Former SCE producer Ryoji Akagawa and chairman Shigeo Maruyama claim that PlayStation was originally designed as 2D-focused hardware. It wasn't until the success of Sega's 3D fighting game, *Virtua Fighter*, in the arcade that they decided to design PlayStation as a 3D-focused device.

There were other key decisions apart from the choice of CPU and technological clout that would affect the machine's future. Fearing that Sony's board might cancel Kutaragi's ambitious and unproven concept, Ohga moved the designer and his nine-member team to Sony Music, a subsidiary of the company. The move was significant: Sony Music understood the importance of nurturing creative talent as well as merely investing in technology, along with the practical demands of manufacturing vast quantities of CDs. In this way, the ecosystem that would support and nurture the PlayStation platform through the years was set.

SHINJI MIKAMI
DIRECTOR, *RESIDENT EVIL*
Before the PlayStation, we could only create characters and worlds in 2D, so being able to use 3D polygons was a giant leap. It let creators break free from the shackles they were bound to, and allowed them to be really creative in the 3D space. The new technology was like giving an artist a bigger canvas, more brushes, and more colours.

HIROAKI YOTORIYAMA
DIRECTOR, NAMCO'S *SOUL BLADE* AND *SOUL CALIBUR* SERIES
Since PlayStation was the first console to use 3D graphics, I was sure that it would bring completely different ideas, and different development and business models, to games. At the same time, I was excited to work as a game developer in this great environment. I was proven right. I joined the development team for the PlayStation version of *Tekken* as a 3D computer graphics animator. The PlayStation generated new jobs in that way – it was a huge change in game development. 3D CG animation took a more and more important role in game development and I have to say I was very lucky to be able to work as an animator with such talented creators at that time.

YOSHINORI KITASE
DIRECTOR, *CHRONO TRIGGER*, *FINAL FANTASY VII* AND *FINAL FANTASY VIII*
The PlayStation's high-specification graphics chip introduced new possibilities to the medium. Likewise, with the high-capacity CD medium we could incorporate full-motion video for the first time. As such, the PlayStation put an even greater emphasis on expression. I originally studied filmmaking at university, so I felt very lucky that I was now able to put that knowledge to use in games.

SHINJI HASHIMOTO
PRODUCER, *FINAL FANTASY* AND *KINGDOM HEARTS* SERIES
It was a time of major innovations, both from the development point of view and ▶

the business one. There was the transition from 2D to 3D graphics, from cartridges to CD-ROM, and the introduction of CG prerendering. PlayStation led the charge with each of these innovations.

JEFF MINTER
FOUNDER, LLAMASOFT
The PlayStation was a very powerful machine sold at a very reasonable price, and had capabilities that opened up the emerging frontier of polygonal 3D games as opposed to sprites and tiles that had been the norm up to that point. Most importantly, it was easy to program, and going for CD-ROM-based media rather than mask ROMs meant less overhead and therefore less risk for developers, as the CD-based media were a lot cheaper than carts.

MASAYA MATSUURA
CREATOR OF *PARAPPA THE RAPPER*
As a musician who was interested in computer technology, I was incredibly excited about extending the CD medium beyond merely listening to music. It seemed like something new and revolutionary. As a result, my career path switched from music over to games, and that is where I have been for the past 20 years. In that respect, the PS1 had a huge and profound impact on my life.

HIROAKI YOTORIYAMA
If I put screenshots of both 3D and 2D game visuals side by side, sometimes 2D visuals still looked nicer than 3D ones. Therefore, we needed to think in different ways when we developed games with 3D visuals. We focused more on light, atmosphere and the position of camera. Of course, one of the toughest aspects of game development at that time was dealing with loading times during gameplay. The length of loading time depends heavily on where you put the data on the disc, when you load the data, and so on. I used a stopwatch to calculate the loading time and brainstormed with genius programmers every day to work out how to minimise loading times.

COLIN ANDERSON
FORMER HEAD OF AUDIO AT DMA DESIGN; NOW MD, DENKI
As someone whose number one passion was, and still is, music, the PlayStation provided a breath of fresh air for our industry. It was the first console from a company I felt really understood the importance and potential of music as part of the videogame experience. That's not to diminish the incredible work composers and engineers had done previously – my favourite game music to this day is still all chiptunes – but while chip music was the norm, it was always going to be hard for gaming to cross over into the mainstream. Non-gamers didn't consider chip music to be a legitimate form, and were never going to think of gaming as anything other than a novelty for kids while that remained the case. PlayStation changed all that because suddenly you were playing games that contained the same music you were hearing on the radio, or at a club. It's hard to overstate how much of a shift that made in the culture of gaming. For that reason I certainly recognise 'before PlayStation' and 'after PlayStation' as two separate epochs.







FROM TOP **Though he never got the chance to create a PS1 title, Jeff Minter was an early fan of Sony's console; *Final Fantasy XV* director Hajime Tabata; musician and *Parappa The Rapper* creator Masaya Matsuura**

THE UNVEILING

Sony was just one of several Japanese electronics manufacturers to announce an entry to the burgeoning console market of the early '90s. It was an interesting development, but memories of the US videogame crash of the 1980s were still fresh for many in the industry, and the arrival of new players to the market wasn't always viewed optimistically.

Most of the media's interest remained focused on Nintendo and Sega, the heavyweights of the industry, whose entire business interest rested in videogames. Consumers needed convincing that Sony's interest in, and commitment to, videogames was serious – and more importantly that the company and its hardware had something new to offer.

YOZO SAKAGAMI
GAME DIRECTOR, *RIDGE RACER*
Several Japanese electronics manufacturers, including Panasonic, Fujitsu and Sony, all announced their entry into the game console business at a similar time. But since there were already other game consoles by experienced companies such as Sega and Nintendo also coming to the market, people were dubious about how PlayStation might perform. It was a chaotic time, in that sense. That said, after I saw the machine, I personally believed that PlayStation could bring a new kind of experience to 3D racing games in particular.

HAJIME TABATA
DIRECTOR, *FINAL FANTASY XV*
I remember that when the system was first shown, it filled both gamers and developers with a new kind excitement. The system showed us a new kind of dream of what games could look and play like. That's why, for many of us, PlayStation is so special.

YOSHINORI KITASE
The film world had recently been rocked by Jurassic Park in 1993, causing a revolution in graphics. Soon afterwards, I remember Sony revealed the PlayStation tech demo that also used a T-Rex. It was an incredible moment that foreshadowed a similar revolution in the world of games.

JASON BROOKES
FORMER EDITOR, **EDGE**
During the awkward migration from 16bit to 32bit, news started to emanate from Japan about a new Sony 32bit machine. Remember, this was a time when there was really no gaming media beyond print magazines; the Internet – including email – hadn't been adopted yet in most facets of UK life. So hot gaming rumours or news from Japan – something I probably valued more highly than nutrition or sleep at that time – had to be translated, typed up and sent on a fax by our newly hired correspondent, Nicolas di Costanzo, a stroppy Frenchman living in Tokyo teaching English, who was to develop a remarkable knack for schmoozing Japanese game execs.

Back then, I was obsessive about console tech specs and the benchmarks by which new systems were becoming judged – the arbitrary 'polygons per second' in particular. So I was ecstatic when, in the thick of issue six's deadline, ▶

HARD OPTIONS

From the inside out, Sony hit every mark when it set out to design its first console

01


02


03


"The system was extremely easy to work with and try ideas out on. It was the first time we had easy access to fully hardware-accelerated 3D. Bear in mind that back then 3D was all pretty much software rendered – even on PC you didn't really see the first wave of 3DFX cards for another two years. Combined with CD storage, suddenly you were no longer restricted to trying to cram a game onto a floppy or cartridge, so you really did have a world of opportunities to explore. It was a really liberating system to work on, and I think that's why it allowed so many new and memorable experiences to be created."

Steve Lycett
Sumo Digital



04


05


01–03 **The base hardware and controller moved through numerous variations before settling on their iconic shapes.** 04 **The Memory Card – an essential buy, alongside a second joypad.** 05 **The official Multitap addon**

we received a faxed list of impressive specs for Sony's upcoming 32bit 'PS-X' – a list Nicolas had typed up from the Nihon Shimbun newspaper. We immediately cleared two pages for a news story and in the same issue devoted space to Sega's Saturn specs, which had also just been revealed. *Ridge Racer*, a dazzling new 3D coin-op from Namco, had taken the cover spot of that issue, as a harbinger of exciting things to come.

MARTIN EDMONDSON

Watching that initial realtime T-Rex demo just blew me away, and I remember buzzing with possibilities for games right at that moment. *Destruction Derby* was a game I'd wanted to make for a while since I loved going to watch derbies as a kid, but until PlayStation, no hardware had existed that could really do it justice. Getting the chance to present a fully fleshed game design to Psygnosis was both exciting and nerve-wracking at the same time, since the dev kits were so rare. Securing the kits was one of the most exciting times I can remember.

When we got the kits into the office, it was just so easy to program. Within an hour or so of receiving the dev kit our lead programmer Mike Troughton had polygons spinning on the screen, and in less than seven days we had the fully textured car driving in a circle – on rails, to be fair – around a makeshift oval track.

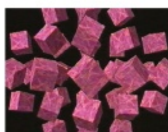
But for me personally it was the fact that for the first time, smooth, detailed and realistic 3D was easily achievable. This in itself transformed games, producing a complete step change from 2D to 3D, bringing in far more believable and immersive experiences. Once PlayStation arrived, nothing looked the same again.

JAKE KAZDAL
ARTIST, *REZ* AND *SPACE CHANNEL 5*; CO-FOUNDER OF 17-BIT

I had just quit my job as a gameplay counsellor at Enix America, and was saving cash to go back to college. I was working my tail off in a dark, cold warehouse, keeping myself warm with thoughts of my soon-to-be-held PlayStation. **Edge** had a bunch of previews of all the upcoming 3D game insanity, and it kept me going through those dark, rainy Seattle days. It just seemed like the future, the arcade come home.









Textured cubes and fast-moving, Gouraud-shaded circles were nifty enough as initial PS1 demos, but it was Sony's T-Rex that made the deepest impression among developers who got to see PS1 in the run up to its launch



The first Edge cover to feature a PlayStation was 1994's issue 11, when Sony's console was still known as PS-X

JENS MATTHIES
CREATIVE DIRECTOR, MACHINEGAMES

I was still at school when the PlayStation was announced, suffering through my final school years, trying to figure out what to do with my life. But I distinctly remember viewing the machine with a mixture of shock and disbelief. "Sony is making a videogame machine? Sony makes CD players, not videogame consoles." Then it was: "It's *how* fast?"

COLIN ANDERSON

I was DMA Design's audio engineer when the PlayStation launched at the tail end of 1994 and about to become part of Nintendo's 'Dream Team' of developers for their Ultra 64 project. I'd not long finished the music and sound effects for DMA's first Super Nintendo title, *Uniracers*, and had started work on the [eventually unreleased] SNES title *Kid Kirby*. I don't remember paying that much attention to the PlayStation launch. Not because I was firmly committed to the Nintendo camp or anything, but because there were so many companies launching games consoles around that time that it was hard to get excited about one that wasn't from Nintendo or Sega. I mean, we'd just been through the 3DO and Amiga CD32 debacles at the time, so a console with 3D graphics and a CD drive wasn't exactly news, even though it was from Sony. They were still a completely unproven name in the games industry, much as Microsoft were a generation later.

PHIL HARRISON

I remember thinking, 'Oh my God, the name is bombing and everyone is going to hate it.' I shared the information with Tokunaka-san [president of SCEI] and he said: "Oh, that's nothing. You should have heard what people said about Walkman."

THE LAUNCH

PlayStation launched in Japan on December 3, 1994, for ¥39,800, nine months before it arrived in the US and Europe. All 100,000 launch units sold out, with another 200,000 shifted in the subsequent 30 days. In short, it was a triumph, one aided by a strong lineup of launch software, led by Namco's storming port of its arcade title *Ridge Racer*, and driven by the comparatively low price of the system's games.

SHUHEI YOSHIDA
PRESIDENT OF WORLDWIDE STUDIOS, SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT

On the morning of December 3, 1994, the day of the original PlayStation console's launch in Japan, I was standing outside Yodobashi Camera store in Shinjuku, watching people purchasing the brand-new PlayStation console with a couple of launch titles, including *Ridge Racer* and *Parodius*. It seemed like every person lining up at the store was there to purchase a PlayStation, and everyone had a big smile on their face when they walked out the large electronics store with a console in their hands.

I think we had shipped about 100k units to retailers for the launch, and all the



stock was gone in the first week or so. It was a great launch – people were so excited about the arcade-quality 3D graphics and CD-quality sound of PlayStation games, especially *Ridge Racer*, which showed off the 3D realtime graphics technology.

HIROAKI YOTORIYAMA

I was one of the first consumers to buy a PlayStation. Perhaps the greatest difference was the price of software – PlayStation games were about half the price of those that came before. I was a hardcore gamer and I spent most of my salary buying every single game released at that time. At that time I was so eager to experience every different idea, concept and design in every game.

JASON BROOKES

Because of Sony's tight control over its wholesale distribution chain, very few early units actually made it to the UK or other countries – in fact, Sony forbid the exporting of any units. Those few that did make it through were mostly purchased at retail – one per customer – for a little under ¥40,000 – £245 at that time. No surprise that on arrival in the UK this was initially hiked upwards of £800 by console 'grey import' retailers eager to hook up desperate early adopters.

JAKE KAZDAL

I actually flew to Tokyo for the launch, and they were totally sold out. Super-senior Enix Japan man Futami-san toured me around the Enix Japan offices, then told me of a wicked little underground shop deep in Shinjuku that would definitely have one, and they did! I have a picture somewhere of me kissing my PlayStation box while it was still on the palette.

ED FRIES

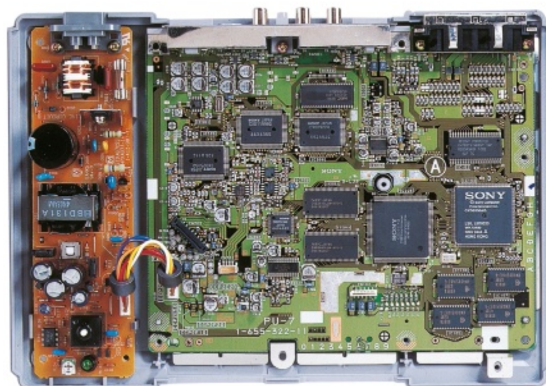
I was still managing the Microsoft Word development team when the original PlayStation launched, playing games in my free time and hoping to get back into the game industry. Just over a year later, I was running Microsoft's fledgling PC game publishing business. At first, PlayStation seemed like a potential ally. For example, in sports, both Microsoft and Sony were competing against EA. So I met with [Sony Imagesoft's] Kelly Flock and we discussed teaming up to take EA on. Nothing came of it. I also met with [Verant's] John Smedley and for a while it looked like we were going to publish *EverQuest*, but that also didn't happen. Then later, of course, we became competitors when Microsoft launched Xbox in 2001.



Teruo 'Terry' Tokunaka, the first president of Sony Computer Entertainment Incorporated, oversaw the introduction of PS1

CHRIS DEERING

After the Japanese launch, Tokyo thought we should launch initially only in UK, France and Germany. But by our launch on September 9, 1995, we were on the ground in 15 markets. What I most enjoyed was our annual conferences when we would share war stories and hunt for weak spots in the competition. My other most favourite thing was to nail exclusives for PlayStation, especially family franchises like Disney movies. I knew from the movie business that lead titles drive a company's momentum, enthusiasm and sense of pride, not to mention a significant point of leverage to secure retailer support in display and promotion. Watching these theories come to life and bear fruit was an amazing high.



Compared to its main competitor at the time, Sega's Saturn, the PS1 architecture was a model of elegance. Key to its power was the so-called Geometry Transformation Engine within its RISC CPU

THE GAMES

The PlayStation software library remains one of the most diverse and interesting of any videogame system. From Squaresoft's ever-bolder clutch of Japanese roleplaying games to Namco's first-rate arcade conversions, Capcom's blossoming survival-horror series, Konami's rhythm-action games and Polyphony's simulation racers through to unusual curios such as *Ape Escape, PaRappa The Rapper, The Book Of Watermarks* and *Jumping Flash*, it's an enviable and historic lineup.

PHIL HARRISON

The team at Namco had created the port of *Ridge Racer* from the coin-op remarkably quickly. I remember realising that was going to be pivotal piece of software for the west in particular.

YOZO SAKAGAMI

Ridge Racer was first developed as an arcade game with [proprietary Namco coin-op architecture] System 22, which was very powerful. Moreover, people could play *Ridge Racer* in the arcade via a huge arcade cabinet, with a steering wheel and a gas pedal, so it was the big challenge for the console game in terms of how we could make it enjoyable to play using the PlayStation controller.

YOSHINORI KITASE

I was working as the co-director on *Chrono Trigger* for the Super Famicom when the PlayStation was launched. We had just started the final debugging stage of development, and the team was incredibly tired. Nevertheless, I remember our development team playing *Ridge Racer* night after night.

YOZO SAKAGAMI

I joined the team as a visual art leader at the beginning and ended up somehow as director of the game. Our team was relatively small – we had only three programmers and four visual designers, with only one PC debug station, which was called 'COW' among our team because the design of the PC itself looked like a cow.

Since PlayStation was a new console at that time, the debug process had to be managed by the programmer, and I needed to be in charge of not only visual art but also some parts of game flow, game design and so on. As a result, I became director on the game.

During the development of *Ridge* ▶

PLAYING TO WIN

The games that defined PS1 at the beginning, and some of the hits that took it to the next level



"I remember everyone being instantly won over by what they saw and heard on the day when our first PlayStation arrived from Japan, mostly upon seeing *Ridge Racer* in action, of course: a state-of-the-art coin-op adaption that loaded in about ten seconds while a pixel-perfect – and *playable* – wave of Galaxians swarmed down the screen. That was really a stroke of genius, I thought – such a smart juxtaposition of gaming's past and future."

Jason Brookes
Former **Edge** *editor*

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04


01 *Ridge Racer* (Namco, 1994). 02 *Tekken* (Namco, 1995). 03 *Battle Arena Toshinden* (Takara, 1995). 04 *Jumping Flash* (SCE, 1995). 05 *Destruction Derby* (Psygnosis, 1995)

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06 *Wipeout* (Psygnosis, 1995). 07 *Tomb Raider* (Eidos Interactive, 1996). 08 *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996). 09 *Gran Turismo* (SCE, 1997). 10 *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami, 1998)



Racer we needed to work on everything from scratch, thinking about how we convert the visual data, how we could adjust each colour between the two versions, and so on. I'm pretty sure we requested lots of support from SCE, since it was a really early stage of PS1 game development, but finding my own way to develop the game from scratch was the one of the best experiences I had during that time, and ultimately we enjoyed the challenges.

JASON BROOKES

The first PlayStation we received at **Edge** was actually just an empty plastic display unit reluctantly supplied by SCE London for issue 17's cover photoshoot. It wasn't until a Fedex box arrived from Nicolas, just prior to deadline, that we finally got our hands on the thing – which of course attracted a big audience of gawkers from neighbouring Future magazines as we unboxed it and plugged it into a big new telly specially bought for the occasion. People from other departments always swamped the office when new hardware arrived, but there had never been this amount of interest, and it was mostly down to how convincing *Ridge Racer* was in showing off what the PlayStation could do.

Of course, the initial launch wave of titles – partly a mixed bag of shooters and mah jong games, if I remember correctly – was just the beginning, and we'd only got a vague sense of what an astonishing impact the console would have upon the gaming world – even new gaming genres. We hadn't played the superlative *Tekken*, we knew nothing of *Gran Turismo*, or even *FFVII*, *Resident Evil*, *Tomb Raider* and *Metal Gear Solid* – all hugely original and genre-defining titles that the platform would give birth to over the next few years.

YOZO SAKAGAMI

Loading times proved to be one of the biggest challenges for game development on PlayStation, because it was still natural for people to play games without loading pauses at that time. Even though they could get used to loading while playing games, we wanted them to be able to play *Ridge Racer* as if there was no loading time. Of course, it was impossible to completely remove loading time, but we brainstormed and decided to load all the data while showing the PlayStation and publisher logo, which allowed users to directly start the game without any stress.

On the other hand, in order to implement this process, it was necessary to limit the total amount of program and visual data we used, and we focused especially on texture data, putting limits on colours and the size of each texture. We believed that beautiful graphics were important, but providing comfortable game flow had to be a higher priority.

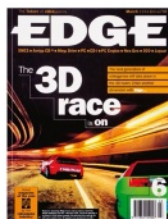


The original PS1 joypad didn't feature analogue sticks, but Namco's NeGcon, released in 1995, brought analogue steering to driving titles such as *Ridge Racer*





FROM TOP **Hideo Kojima and Kazunori Yamauchi had successful design careers prior to PS1, but the *MGS* and *GT* series saw them move into different gears**



***Ridge Racer* was already on our radar as early as issue six – albeit in the shape of the original Namco arcade machine**

STEVE LYCETT

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, SUMO DIGITAL

At the time of the PlayStation's launch, a bunch of game stores had sprung up around the Super Nintendo grey import scene in Sheffield. One day I wandered into one of these having just played on the full-scale *Ridge Racer* at the local Namco Wonderpark, and there was a crowd gathered around a PlayStation running the very same game. It was pretty mind-blowing to see a console as powerful as a full-on dedicated arcade system, especially as 3D was only really starting to take hold at that point in arcades.

Later, I remember being at DICE when we were working on [racing game] *Motorhead*. *Gran Turismo* had just been released. All the guys were sat in the room looking at the replay feature and were just amazed at what they were seeing. It really felt like every new release back then just kept pushing boundaries, and that developers around the world were pushing to outdo each other.

NAOKI YOSHIDA

PRODUCER/DIRECTOR, *FINAL FANTASY XIV: A REALM REBORN*

The first PlayStation came out just before I entered the games industry, but I can certainly remember going all out playing the time attack mode on the original *Ridge Racer*. I spent so much time drifting around the tracks in Time Trial mode that I ended up breaking the controller. Even now, I feel it was such a brilliant title that skirted the borderline between games and reality. I also enjoyed the *Final Fantasy* titles on PS1, and I'm highly honoured to be able to work on the series today.

One of the wonderful things about the system was how there were so many different types of game released, with wildly different design ideas. Even now, I feel totally blown away by and unable to compete with the game and character designs in *Devil Dice*.

CLIFF BLESZINSKI

FORMERLY OF EPIC GAMES; NOW OF BOSS KEY PRODUCTIONS

The PlayStation singlehandedly reignited my love of consoles. Games like *Battle Arena Toshinden* and *Warhawk* might have the most mindshare for memories, but my favourite was *Jumping Flash*. It's a game that still inspires me.

ADAM SALTSMAN

CREATOR OF *CANABALT*

I can count on one hand the number of videogames that I was obsessed with before the PlayStation arrived. On just the first PlayStation I had similar obsessive experiences with *Final Fantasy VII*, *Warhawk*, *Tenchu*, *Metal Gear Solid*, *Crash Bandicoot*, *Jet Moto*, *Final Fantasy Tactics*, *Tomb Raider*, *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night*, *Time Crisis*, *Twisted Metal 2*… and I'm probably missing a couple of others. I played so much that I had to tip the PlayStation upside down and keep the lid off and a set of screwdrivers handy to adjust the bias on the laser just to get the games to work after a while. It made a massive and permanent impression on me.

I can perfectly remember the first time I entered the Cistern level in the first *Tomb Raider*. It is impossible to say why, but that just made a huge impression on me. I remember a single afternoon where I 'got' *Tenchu* and breezed through five or six levels in one go, as if I was in a trance, and unconsciously spending the next day at school peeking around corners to see if there were guards down near the gym. And I remember playing *Metal Gear Solid* and thinking, 'This is it – this is the future of games'. For once, I was right.

SHINJI MIKAMI

It was the first system that allowed me to make a game with 3D polygons, so I remember everything being totally new. We had to learn everything from zero, so it wasn't easy, but at the same time my ▶



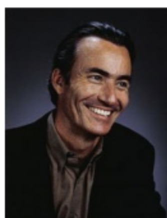
hopes were high. Fortunately, *Resident Evil* was well received, and the hard work paid off.

MARTIN EDMONDSON
Prior to PlayStation, we'd had some hits like *Shadow Of The Beast*, but they were limited in their appeal, and sold to a pretty hardcore Amiga-owning gamer. *Destruction Derby* and *Driver* were successful on a whole other level, reaching a more massmarket audience that Sony had created with the PlayStation. It certainly got us noticed. GT Interactive bought Reflections towards the end of development on *Driver*, so that game was life-changing in that respect.



THE COMPETITION

Competition for domination of the console market was never as fierce as it was during the mid-1990s. Nintendo 64 and the 32bit Sega Saturn vied for consumer attention alongside upstarts such as Sony's offering and 3DO, Fujitsu's FM Towns Marty, Apple's Pippin, NEC's PC-FX, and Atari's Jaguar, its final attempt to recreate the success of its VCS/2600. It was a time of unprecedented choice for videogame consumers and, for failures in the market, a time of unprecedented loss.





The 3DO hardware launched by Trip Hawkins (above) was set to get an upgrade via the proposed M2 module, giving it PS1-rivalling power (top), but the success of Sony's console put paid to long-term viability for the platform



3DO

TRIP HAWKINS
FOUNDER, THE 3DO COMPANY
At the time of the PlayStation launch I was waiting at 3DO, wondering what the Japanese price would be. We were struggling to get 3DO sales at $499, but Sony did pretty well in Japan and then of course stunned everyone when they launched at $299 the next year in the US.

PHIL HARRISON
At E3 in 1995 [Sony Interactive Entertainment president] Olaf Olafsson was doing the spiel about growth in the industry and droning on – it was deliberately staged that way. I can't remember a single thing about his presentation, but he did say that he'd like to bring on stage the president of Sony Computer Entertainment America to share with everyone an important piece of information. Steve Race went up to the microphone, just said, "299", and sat back down again. [Sega had just announced a retail price of $399 for its Saturn console.] The room erupted.

TRIP HAWKINS
I was at the E3 conference in 1995 when the US launch price of $299 was announced from the stage. Howard Lincoln of Nintendo was also on stage and immediately mocked what he saw as a money-losing proposition by saying, "I hope your shareholders like that". But what it demonstrated was Sony's compelling commitment to long-term success. They knew that the manufacturing costs of CD-ROM drives and RAM would come down a lot within a year. They put an enormous bet on the table, but their intelligence matched the swagger.

GEOFF GLENDENNING
FORMER HEAD OF MARKETING, SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT EUROPE
Sega's Saturn launched six months ahead of the PlayStation. Their advertising campaign – gritty and edgy – was amazing, whereas our mainstream ads were quite young and childish. They had a pretty similar lineup of games, the technology was similar, and they were far better known to consumers. And yet when we came to Easter in 1996, when we dropped the PlayStation's price to £199, it all changed. Sega's head of marketing had called me up and said, "We're not scared – you all look scared, and as you're running away, we're going to chase you out of town with a baseball bat." That Easter, PlayStation outsold the Saturn by eight-and-a-half to one. They never recovered from that. From that point onwards, they started to be delisted from the high street retailers.

JEFF MINTER
When the PlayStation launched I was in the midst of moving to California to go and work for Atari. Personally speaking, it had a pretty negative effect, as the system ended up being much more popular and better than the Atari Jaguar and likely precipitated the end for Atari, thereby putting me out of a job! But the end of one job led to another, and just like everyone else I still loved playing the PlayStation regardless.

JASON BROOKES
Those early days of **Edge** were all about transition. It was a time when 16bit computers – Amiga/ST – and consoles – SNES/Mega Drive – were duking it out for market share, the PC was also starting to turn heads as a games machine, and the newly arrived 3DO and Atari Jaguar were jostling for a head start on the coming 'next generation'. But these latter systems quickly fell short of convincing gamers and developers – 3DO was way too expensive, and the Jaguar seemed underpowered. Most notably, many 'next-gen' games were cursed with barely interactive FMV or were just poorly designed western action games. As a result, we found ourselves in a moral dilemma, between encouraging readers to support the fledgling systems while cautioning them to hold out in case something better came along. The uncomfortable truth we felt so palpably

back then was that the next generation could – and should – be so much better.

DOUG BONE

FORMER GAMES MANAGER, HMV; NOW GENERAL MANAGER, UK & DIGITAL, SQUARE ENIX

I was working at HMV's Liverpool branch, at a time when the 'hot new consoles' were the Atari Jaguar and the 3DO. Both had generated a lot of interest, but there's no doubt it was Sega's Saturn and Sony's PlayStation that were generating the most excitement. We'd followed their Japanese launches – mainly via **Edge** – and everybody was pumped about the opportunities from the new hardware and the delivery of, finally, true 'arcade perfect' experiences at home. These machines were going to do everything we'd always wanted and in the case of PlayStation, having a brand that was cool in its own right – not just to gamers – meant that everybody else was starting to take an interest, too.

JAKE KAZDAL

I brought my new Japanese PlayStation to my friend's game studio, Lobotomy, in Seattle. They had a 70" TV with a bunch of other systems hooked up to it. The whole company came down to the break room to check out my new toy, and as we played our first game of *Ridge Racer* on this massive TV, I remember my friend Kevin Chung just screaming out: "DUDE, 3DO IS SO DEAD!" Classic.

JASON BROOKES

In Sony's offices, after signing a bunch of NDAs, we were granted time with a PS-X dev kit, a prototype controller and the infamous animated dinosaur that we'd already printed a screenshot of in the magazine. It was jaw-droppingly impressive compared to any 3D graphics we'd seen running on a home system, and we also got to experience some other realtime demos of the graphics and sound capabilities, which also embodied the mantra that SCE Japan would later tout: "If it's not realtime, it's not a game".

Afterwards, on the train home, dazed by the beauty of the visuals we'd seen, I remember us salivating at the possibilities of 30fps, realtime, textured worlds, and feeling pretty special that we were the only UK journalists we knew of who had somehow been admitted to Sony's secret club. Of course, the bittersweet reality was that we weren't allowed to reveal a thing in the magazine.

With hindsight, that meeting was quite a shrewd move by Phil Harrison, even if it wasn't intentional. From that moment onwards, our faith in the current 'next-gen' console establishment waned fast. With Nintendo's next-gen plans still unknown, we felt even more assured that the real next generation was to be a two-horse race between Sega and Sony. As if to hasten this, a cynical, no-punches-pulled 3DO article was run in **Edge** issue ten, suggesting on the cover that it might be '3DOA' for poor old Trip Hawkins and his next-gen ambitions. To this day, I still feel bad about that cover.



SCE man Geoff Glendenning (above) helped to take PS1 to war with Sega's Saturn (below). It didn't take long for a victor to emerge









With Star Wars and *Zelda* titles in the works, it was impossible to ignore 'Ultra 64', Nintendo's response to Sony's ambitions

THE MARKETING

In every territory, Sony's marketing of its PlayStation was unlike anything that had come before. This was a new system, carrying a new message with the promise of a new way of doing things. Nowhere was that clearer than in the UK and Europe, where, aided by games such as *Wipeout*, the PlayStation name became synonymous with club culture and the underground. This was a console with a cultural cachet that no videogame system had enjoyed before.

GLEN O'CONNELL

FORMER HEAD OF UK PR AT *WIPEOUT* PUBLISHER PSYGNOSIS

PlayStation spoke to and engaged with gameplayers as people and offered things that reflected their own personal interests; it didn't talk down to them as children. It also had games that looked and sounded like nothing that had come before. PlayStation helped open up the industry to delivering content that was as credible as any other entertainment form.

As well as the work the Psygnosis team and its titles did to support the launch of PlayStation, there were also some incredibly smart and talented people working for PlayStation UK, such as Geoff Glendenning, who really helped push PlayStation out there in an edgy way that smashed down many barriers for the whole industry. If you look back at the SAPS [Society Against PlayStation] advertising campaign they were asked to launch with compared to what this new, smart and credible teen and 20-something audience who bought into PlayStation was demanding, the innovative guerrilla work Geoff spearheaded in the UK definitely touched the passions of these opinion formers like never before. Without their energy and desire, PlayStation may have just been another games console with good sales that appealed to core gamers, rather than becoming one of the world's most successful brands, which it remains today.

GEOFF GLENDENNING

The interesting thing was that a brief had been put out to the European agency saying that the position of the PlayStation globally was ten- to 14-year-old boys. It was very much following the Sega and Nintendo business model. But I didn't think the market could sustain three major players in the console market. I mean, the record for the most number of installed consoles in the UK was held by the SNES, and they'd sold I think two-and-a-half million. That was the market saturation point in those days.

It all coincided with the rise of club culture. You had this massive movement of underground that was becoming kind of mainstream in the mid-'90s, around the ▶



time of the launch of PlayStation. It also coincided with a media explosion of lifestyle magazines to report on the subculture. I began to write a top-line document in my spare time called 'Credibility for PlayStation', which was arguing that perhaps we should be launching PlayStation not to ten- to 14-year-olds, but actually, keeping in mind the 32bit technology and the jump in games quality, to get on the top of the piles of influencers and opinion formers, to actually drive quite an older brand position. I proposed that we should be looking at an 18-to-35 age group, to go for that position because that's what the kids aspire to.

I printed this document and put it in everybody's pigeonholes, and it's something that we as a team adopted. We felt we could create word of mouth in the underground and build this essential sense of credibility. The build-up to the '95 launch was very much in the early day of identifying, connecting with, and building an army of ambassadors within youth culture. It coincided with the spread of club culture out of the UK. I don't think it would be replicable. It was almost entirely part of the zeitgeist. And we were able to get away with it because Chris Deering, as president, had such global respect. The Japanese pretty much let us, Europe or EMEA, get on with it.

CHRIS DEERING

I think that our marketing in Europe was really special, employing tactics from the music industry in reaching audiences in many personal ways and not just with big TV budgets. We did a lot of Red Bull-type sponsorships of skateboard and snowboard events. I believe that SCEE was extra special because we hired very young, very passionate people who just wanted to make a difference. We had no stock options in the beginning, and our pay scales were low, but we made it a fun place to work. Even as late as seven years into the life of SCEE, our average employee age was 25. So, as you can imagine, a great deal of our really coolest strategies and tactics were dreamed up at office parties, birthdays and any other excuse for a piss-up.







CLOCKWISE FROM TOP **Psygnosis's Nick Burcombe and Nicky Carus-Westcott prepare for the launch of *Wipeout* in 1995; the dedicated PS1 area at Ministry Of Sound; official *Wipeout* garb**



Sony's US division didn't quite get with the programme at first, coming up with the awful, much-derided 'Polygon Man' mascot

GEOFF GLENDENNING

I was a real pitbull terrier then, always going out to rock the boat. I had a vision, which wasn't about spending shitloads in a traditional way on mass media. Because we had the NTSC machine for almost a year before the European launch, we had a year to seed credibility. And one thing in the early part of '95 that gave me such confidence was presenting to people that'd come into the office from magazines like The Face, iD, or obscure underground magazines which had readerships of maybe 5,000. I'd say, "Do you like videogames?" And they'd go, "No, we hate them." I'd say, "OK, that's fine – just have a look at this and see what you think." And without exception, every single person walked out going, "All right, this is fucking amazing." People were actually printing just a series of screenshots in their magazines because *Battle Arena Toshiden* looked so amazing. Nobody had ever seen anything like it before.

CHRIS DEERING

I remember in 2001, our Belgian team had a giant PlayStation party on a Saturday night in a huge indoor bicycle-racing arena in Ghent to celebrate some sales milestone. When they told me that they were importing a DJ from Japan and were expecting 3,000 people, I panicked, thinking that they were blowing their marketing budget on an indulgent frivolity. But the Belgian team had a different plan. They partnered with a radio station to push the event as the place to be seen, and actually charged consumers €30 each to attend the event. SCEE Belgium turned a profit. The party was due to end at 3am, but actually continued until 8am on Sunday morning. I took the train over to see it, and it was amazing. Another fantastic memory involves a similar type of party in Zurich that was held in an abandoned jail, and another in Barcelona in an indoor bullfighting arena. We wanted to have fun, and for our fans to have fun. They responded. PlayStation was not just a product, it was a culture. For many, it remains one today.

LEE CARUS

ARTIST, *WIPEOUT*; CO-FOUNDER, FIRESPRITE GAMES

I'll never forget getting invited to our little superclub here in Liverpool, Cream, for a night that the brilliant Sue in marketing had put on for some competition winners. I thought, 'Free night out at Cream – what's not to like?' Being local and into that scene, I'd been to Cream many times, but this time was different. I was ushered past the queues waiting to get in and straight into the VIP section. I remember thinking to myself, 'This is odd'. While marketing did have these VIP tickets, the club is massive, so it was filled with the usual crowd, and as usual I was keen to get in among them.

When I got down to the floor, I was blown away. I looked up and saw that the massive projection screens that normally displayed Chemical Brothers or Orbital videos were showing footage from *Wipeout*. As I walked on, I noticed the clubbers taking time out to play the game on pods that Sue had installed. But it didn't feel weird, it didn't seem out of place – it looked right! It *felt* right!

Later on, Sue came rushing over to me with this guy who won a competition in France to be at the Cream *Wipeout* event. She introduced me as a member of the dev team, and his eyes lit up. He ▶

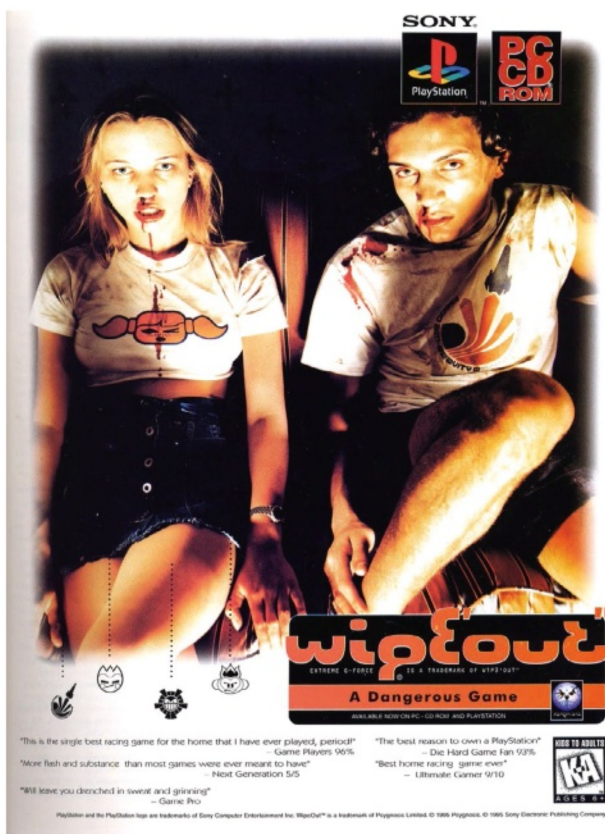
SONY STYLE

The campaigns and collaborations that pushed PlayStation into uncharted territory

"It was very much about generating word of mouth from the underground. I actually had a small team in-house. I felt it essential not to be a faceless corporation. For example, we were next door to Sony Music, and I wanted to go and meet the team there. I was told: 'No, no, you have to wait to be introduced.' Well, bollocks to that. So I just got a massive stack of games and just went floor to floor and met every record label, every marketing guy, and built relationships there. When we launched, we gave free PlayStations to all of the important Sony Music artists."

Geoff Glendenning
Former head of marketing, SCEE

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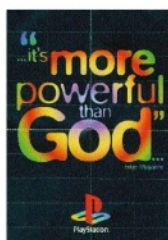
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01–02 **With PS1, Psygnosis transformed its image from purveyor of fantasy-themed computer games to the home of *Wipeout*.** 03 **Ministry Of Sound was one of many Sony partners in clubland.** 04–05 **The *Wipeout* game and music album.** 06 **A PlayStation/ The Face crossover.** 07–08 **The Chemical Brothers and Orbital, stars of *Wipeout*'s soundtrack.** 09 **The infamous perforated PS1 flyer.** 10 **An early focus on the PS symbols.** 11 **PS1's first UK TV ad, featuring 'SAPS'**

fumbled around and pulled out a camera and thrust it into Sue's hand, saying, "Take a picture, take a picture!" I must have had the most confused look on my face when he developed the film.

That night, I realised that *Wipeout* might be quite popular, but more importantly that this little grey box called PlayStation might be massive.

GEOFF GLENDENNING
We ended up installing PlayStation rooms in 52 nightclubs across the UK. We gave them kit and free games regularly, and they built their own special rooms. And I've a document somewhere that shows all the photographs of every different room – every room was different. We didn't do every club, we just supported the top club in every town, so it became cool for them to identify that they had PlayStation. It ended up that they'd put our logo on their flyers as well. Fifty-two clubs were putting our logo on every flyer they distributed. We had more than ten million flyers a month going out across the UK with our logo on them, for free. We had visuals playing in every club because I did these mixed visuals tapes. We were sponsoring Tribal Gathering and Big Love. We pretty much owned club culture.

THE SALES

PlayStation's relatively low pricing gave the console the early boost it needed to take root in the Japanese market. Within a month, the console had sold out its 300,000-unit allocation. While Sony lost a considerable amount of money on each console sold until the end of 1995, the fact that the machine was ¥5,000 cheaper than Sega's Saturn was crucial. By March 2007, Sony had sold 102 million PlayStation systems into homes across the world.

YOSHINORI KITASE
Because the games were sold on CD-ROMs, music shops and convenience stores suddenly started to sell games in Japan. Before that, people could only buy games in dedicated game stores. I was quite worried at the time as to whether customers would be able to keep up with these changes, and whether we would be able to sell our games properly. When *FFVII* was released, I wanted to see with my own eyes whether customers would buy our game or not, so I went out at 7am – the time that convenience stores opened – and stood watching in the shops to check on the customers lining up at the till. I asked around later and it turns out I was not the only one who thought like that – lots of the other team members had also been on stakeout at their local convenience stores that morning.











The best ad campaigns to accompany Sony consoles over the years – this one's probably still our favourite – have their roots in the work done by Geoff Glendenning's team at the very beginning of PlayStation's life

GEOFF GLENDENNING
[UK retail chain] Dixons were very arrogant in those days, and they believed through their successes that if you were launching a consumer electronic product, if you didn't have Dixons selling it, you'd fail. It was a real concern, particularly within the sales department, that we didn't have Dixons and that potentially we were going to fail. But I never had any doubt it was going to be a huge success. I knew what the word of mouth was with most of the influencers, and the momentum they were building up. Then, in Easter 1996, after we dropped the PlayStation's price, we outsold Sega's Saturn by eight-and-a-half to one. Dixons came right back on board then. But I think, to be honest, the chain was in decline from there.

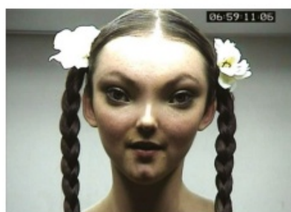
CHRIS DEERING
Our original European business plan was to sell around four million PlayStation over three years, and around 15 million games. It seemed like an impossible dream, given the strength of Nintendo and Sega. I was thrilled to have a go at facing of against Nintendo's Howard Lincoln and Sega's Tom Kalinske, but we were just hoping at that stage to get a permanent seat at the grown-ups' table. We knew that the Sony name and image would expand the console market and make gaming more respectable as a family entertainment medium.

My favourite experiences at SCEE were holding meetings with the heads of our subsidiaries in 12 countries, including Australia and New Zealand, and distributors from Iceland and Scandinavia to South Africa and Turkey and Saudi Arabia. I was used to dealing with all of these territories, plus Japan and South Korea, Taiwan, and all of Latin America at Sony Pictures, so I wanted to leverage this with a common plan around the world, something that Sega and Nintendo didn't really have, with their distributors mostly fighting one another, shipping into each other's markets to make their numbers.

DOUG BONE
Glen O'Connell from Psygnosis was a regular customer in HMV and he brought a PlayStation in to give me a sneak peak of *Wipeout*. He then left it there for a week or so, as he was keen to hear what sort of reaction it was getting. This was in early '95 and, in short, the response was phenomenal. We'd have crowds gathered in the shop, so we decided to start taking preorders, months in advance of when we were officially meant to. HMV head office found out about this, and their head of games, Gerry Berkley, called me to find out where all these preorders had suddenly come from. Then he decided that I'd be the right person to move down to London and help them launch the console across the whole chain. Those were my first steps into the industry.

THE IMPACT

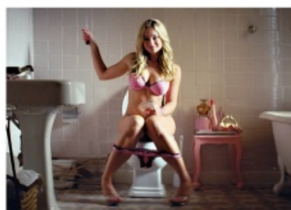
With hindsight, it's easy to see how Sony's console disrupted the videogame









Sony's willingness to embrace risk from the outset set an agenda that would see directors including David Lynch signed up to create unusual ads to define the PlayStation brand as it's evolved over the past 20 years

market in fundamental ways. The company's initial absence of an in-house software development studio meant that the company was able to attract all of the major publishers to create games for its platform, knowing that their titles wouldn't be passed over in favour of heavily marketed firstparty releases.

Sony Music's understanding of the need for diversity and nurturing small-studio talent resulted in a wave of new studios being founded across Japan, all of which were able to thrive on Sony's comparatively generous royalty rates.

Meanwhile, the positioning of the system as an entertainment centre, able to play music CDs as well as games, showed the importance of technological convergence in the home (PS2's DVD-playing capabilities would lead Sony to dominate the market in later years), while the fact that this was marketed as a machine for adults, rather than a toy for children, helped broaden the artistic ambitions of its game makers.

GLEN O'CONNELL

Prior to the European launch titles, I remember taking home an NTSC Japanese console in late 1994 with *Ridge Racer* and *Toshinden* for the first time and being blown away by how incredible it looked and sounded. I can only describe it as like having a coin-op in your living room, especially with the TV volume turned up. It was such a step up, in terms of audio and visuals, from SNES and Mega Drive, or even the CD-based stuff we saw on Mega CD and 3DO, which felt like impersonal PC-type experiences stuck on CD because they could fill the space.

It's easy to say this now, but it definitely felt like this little grey box would shine a big bright light towards the future of the games industry and do more than any to deliver the acceptance of gaming as a credible pastime.

LEE CARUS

Once *Wipeout* launched, things changed. The phone started ringing – all of a sudden other companies wanted to grab some of the talent that was associated with *Wipeout*, with a PlayStation launch title. I remember walking around one of the big game shows in London after launch – was it ECTS? – and people manning the stands would check out your name badge and basically wrestle you into their meeting rooms for a 'quick chat'. A few companies in the US came calling and even arranged for me and others to fly out to talk about moving there. I decided against it in the end, but the experience changed me. I wanted more of that, but I wanted to do it with Sony, and eventually I did. Even now, 20 years on at Firesprite, I'm still loving the journey, especially with helping to deliver another PlayStation launch title with *The Playroom* on PS4. I think hardware launches are in my DNA now. It's a buzz that comes around infrequently, and the team at the studio and I love being a part of it.



Glen O'Connell headed up PR for games such as *Wipeout* at Psygnosis, before moving to EA. He now runs a sports and entertainment marketing consultancy

NICK FERGUSON

FORMER NET YAROZE PROGRAMMER

Sony's Net Yaroze programme is directly responsible for my career in the videogame industry. I remember visiting my friend James Rutherford's student flat when he showed me his Net Yaroze game, *Snowball Fight*, which he'd coded for a competition in **Edge**. I was simply blown away to discover that someone I knew had written a console game singlehanded. It was a thunderbolt – I realised overnight what I wanted to do. I went out and bought a copy of C For Dummies the same week. Once I was confident I could get my head around the basics of programming, I ordered a Net Yaroze using the remnants of my student loan. I wrote one-and-a-half terrible games for it – I was more of a C script kiddie than a real programmer, given my reliance on tutorials and existing source code – but that was enough in 1999 to get me my first job in QA. My friend James landed a programming job at Reflections, starting there just after the release of *Driver*. That was pretty cool, I thought.

GLEN O'CONNELL

Taking home an import machine for the very first time felt like a Christmas-morning emotion as a young child. People who came to my house couldn't believe what this little grey box was outputting on the screen. Loaning my local HMV store an import PlayStation and seeing the giddiness of the games manager Doug Bone excitedly showcase it to customers as they flocked to see it will live long in ▶



my memory. And getting up early to drive down to **Edge**'s offices in Bath with Psygnosis's own games, like *Wipeout*, remains a definite highlight. There was no hard sell because everybody wanted to see it, touch it and talk about it. It was incredible to have such a wonderful-looking and -sounding product to help showcase what the console was all about. The fact we also took gaming into an adult environment,with support from bands like The Chemical Brothers and The Prodigy across nightclubs, allowed everybody connected to the game to feel like they were showcasing it to people who shared their own personal interests, as opposed to trying to think what an eight- to ten-year-old may or may not like.

JASON BROOKES

I think [PlayStation's popularity] had a lot to do with Sony's more open stance to working with developers. With PlayStation, Sony opened its doors to its development environment in the way that Japanese hardware companies previously hadn't. Instead of controlling and restricting information, Sony development staff, and particularly Phil Harrison, shifted the power struggles from a top-down, authoritarian model to today's more mutually beneficial developer 'partnerships'.

For publishers, there were better economic incentives, too. Through the late '80s and early '90s, most game companies felt trepidation when ordering production runs through Nintendo and to a lesser extent Sega, simply because cartridges cost so damn much that the financial risks suffered with a flop were huge. This was lessened with the PlayStation since the manufacturing savings of CD-ROM enabled Sony to carve ¥4,000 off the cost of a new game. The launch lineup of PlayStation games shipped for ¥5,800 each – about £35 at the time – and by comparison most Super Famicom games were still selling for ¥9,800 yen [£60].

COLIN ANDERSON

From a professional perspective, the PlayStation had a pretty big impact because it ultimately ushered in the CD-ROM as a legitimate mainstream games medium, and that marked a sea change for anyone working in the field of game audio, as I was. While there had been games with CD soundtracks before then, they were still relatively rare in the early/mid-'90s. The PlayStation's mass adoption meant that CD music would soon become commonplace. Some of the early PlayStation titles really started taking advantage of that, probably none so importantly from my perspective as *Wipeout*. Tim Wright's incredible original soundtrack coupled with the high-profile addition of tracks by artists like Leftfield and The Chemical Brothers set a really high standard for any of us releasing on the platform after them. That strengthened my argument a lot when I began campaigning to have a CD soundtrack for *Grand Theft Auto*. When we initially started developing *GTA* it was firmly expected to have a MIDI soundtrack of some description, so Craig [Conner] and I were sketching out ideas as standard MIDI files, but then by the end of 1995 DMA had installed one of the world's first entirely hard-disk-based recording systems to record a CD soundtrack for the game. I'm not sure that would have happened if it hadn't been for the PlayStation putting CD music front and centre, and Tim setting the bar so high with *Wipeout*.

It had such a tremendous effect on the industry because it fundamentally changed the culture of gaming. Some of that was technological – the mainstream adoption of 3D graphics and CD audio – but most of it was to do with marketing and perception, involving companies like Ministry Of Sound and The Designers Republic. It took it from a niche industry of hobbyists and enthusiasts making games for themselves and their friends, and began its transformation into the legitimate massmedia entertainment business it is today. All of a sudden it was OK for someone over the age of 14 to admit that they enjoyed playing computer games. In today's enlightened society of geek chic, where it's now cool to be nerdy, it's actually hard to remember how socially unacceptable it was to be a gamer in most circles back in the '90s. But suddenly clubs in London and New York were installing gaming stations sponsored by Sony where clubbers could relax between Oakenfold sets with a few rounds of *Virtua Fighter* or *Ridge Racer*. That opened up the entire market for games to a new demographic, and as a result when our first PlayStation game eventually launched, it was selling four copies on PlayStation for every one it sold on PC.

PlayStation changed the culture by bringing an adult audience to gaming who were interested in edgier content than the traditional fantasy and sci-fi fare our industry had been renowned for up to that point. PlayStation suddenly made it cool to be a gamer. In an industry still convinced of the importance of technology and original ideas, it's funny to think that one of its most significant changes of the past 20 years had almost nothing to do with tech or ideas at all, and everything to do with image and perception.

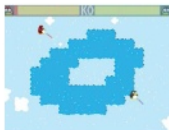
DOUG BONE

The PlayStation made its own rules. It had a simple proposition – lots of great-looking games! – and instead of just aiming low and trying to engage with youngsters in the playground, as had happened with the previous generation, it shot at an older demographic, confident in the knowledge that if the big brother wanted it, then the younger brother would aspire to it anyway. I was in HMV head office at the time and you could see people's attitudes changing, fast.









Sony's Net Yaroze PlayStation, and some of its best-known games: *Total Soccer, Terra Incognita* and *Snowball Fight*

EDGE CASES

A collection of leftfield releases that illustrate the diversity of PS1's enormous catalogue



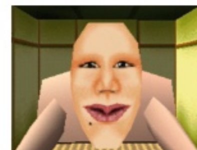
"Today I look back on the more experimental and strange side of the PlayStation catalogue and can see how far ahead of the curve studios like NanaOn-Sha and ArtDink were. Their creativity continues to inspire me. When I was a teenager I desperately wanted to make PlayStation games. I spent ages practising low-polygon 3D models and optimising my textures and practising my vertex lighting. Now I fantasise about building programmable graphics pipelines with bad anisotropy, rounded vertex coordinates, and dithered screen-spaces in Unity, just to recreate the look. PlayStation is an aesthetic in and of itself."

Adam Saltsman
Creator, Canabalt

01



02



03



04

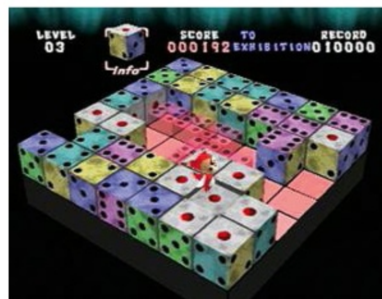


01 ***Vib Ribbon*** **(SCE, 1999).** 02 ***LSD: Dream Emulator*** **(Asmik Ace, 1998).** 03 ***Harmful Park*** **(1999, Sky Think).** 04 ***Bust A Groove*** **(Enix, 1998).** 05 ***Parappa The Rapper*** **(SCE, 1996)**

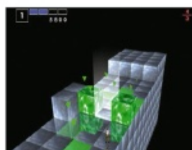
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06 ***Devil Dice*** **(SCE, 1998).** 07 ***IQ*** **(SCE, 1997).** 08 ***Bushido Blade*** **(Square, 1997).**
09 **The Book Of Watermarks (SCE, 1999).** 10 ***Incredible Crisis*** **(Tokuma Shoten, 1999)**



Remember, this was a time when Britpop was absolutely booming and bands like The Prodigy and The Chemical Brothers were starting to really hit the mainstream, yet on many a Monday morning, our MD, Brian McLaughlin, would come to the games department first and ask us stuff like, "How many *F1*s have you sold?" Only then would he eventually go to the music department to see how the new Pulp CD had done. Like… wow.

GLEN O'CONNELL

Prior to PlayStation launching, talking of working in the gaming industry or playing games to people outside of the industry, or even to many of your own family and circle of friends, didn't always seem right. You'd find yourself not being taken seriously and asked, "When are you going to get a real job?" Or people would say things like, "Games are for eight-year-olds, aren't they?" It was perceived as much more of a niche hobby than it is today. While it didn't change overnight with PlayStation, it was certainly as big a tipping point for the gaming industry as any other.

JAKE KAZDAL

I think the impact was partly due to the face that the prohibitive licensing structure Nintendo enforced was finally obliterated, paving the way for many small studios to do all kinds of fun, weird, new, lower-budget titles. At the same time, it was the first time 3D gaming had an opportunity to affect so many people, and really change the way people felt about videogames. It's not often such a quantum leap in how games are perceived comes along, and this was arguably the biggest transition gaming had ever experienced. There were consistently new paradigms and new genres throughout the life of the PlayStation, a time of constant discovery for both developers and players alike.

LEE CARUS

Most of all, I think it was about the people. There was an almost celestial alignment of talent that came together, from fearless, fledgling marketers to execs that were willing to take a chance on innovation. From the hardware guys in Japan to the dev teams across the world, this mad, disparate bunch of people was hauled together under the PlayStation banner, and it just worked.





ABOVE **The Japan-only PocketStation, offering an LCD screen, was released in 1999.** RIGHT **Sony introduced PSone, a considerably smaller PlayStation model, in mid-2000**







Teiyu Goto has revamped his original design as Sony has worked through four generations of PS hardware, but the joypad's central form factor hasn't changed radically in 20 years

MARTIN EDMONDSON

It was a tremendously exciting time to be in the games industry as we were involved in something that was cutting-edge and bursting with explosive potential. Just before PlayStation I had started to become a little bored of games, to be honest, frustrated by the limitations of hardware, and the PlayStation just blew that all open again. It was fantastic.

NICK FERGUSON

From my perspective at the time, the impact was down to the fast, striking 3D visuals – they improved dramatically in the first couple of years, and increasingly made my beloved Super Nintendo look like a child's plaything. With the benefit of 20 years' hindsight, Sony's catholic embrace of the thirdparty development community probably had as much to do with it, if not more, than the raw technical specifications. In the end, everybody was playing the thing. Whereas childhood had been neatly divided into 'Spectrum versus C64', 'Atari versus Amiga' and 'SNES versus Mega Drive', it seemed like everyone I knew had that ubiquitous grey box in their bedroom. I would pick the Nintendo 64 as my favourite console of that era, in part because of the longevity of software like *Super Mario 64*, *GoldenEye*, *Ocarina Of Time* and *Banjo-Kazooie*. But those classic Nintendo titles only came along once or twice a year – which was just as well because they cost a fortune on import. It would have been a lonely and expensive hardware generation without PlayStation!

MASAYA MATSUURA

Many people would probably say that the PlayStation's impact was in bringing 3D computer graphics to the living room, but I would take one step back from that. At the time, digital media hardware was rapidly losing its appeal. People just thought of these pieces of hardware as some set-top boxes with different brand names.

But the PlayStation was much more than that. It could be seen as a computer, a music-playback device, or even just a toy – it didn't fit into any one category. So in any given household it could become a multipurpose tool, and it's this flexibility that made it a hit. And also, as a result of some aggressive business concepts, the titles for the PS1 were really unique and exciting, piquing the interest of otherwise

uninterested customers as well. The PlayStation was just this strange magical box that morphed itself to the specific needs of its owner. I think most console manufacturers have tried to copy this ever since the PlayStation's launch.

GEOFF GLENDENNING
Why did PlayStation do so well? Well, it was amazing technology, of course, and the console itself looked great. Sony had brilliant thirdparty developer relationships and really made it easy for people to develop for the console. You know, when I went out marketing PlayStation I didn't limit myself to Sony firstparty games. I looked at the lineup and said: "Which are the best games out at the moment?" I remember phoning up the product manager who was working on *Tomb Raider* to ask for three boxes of the game because I wanted to give them out to celebrities. He's going, "Oh, I'll have to check on that." I said: "Listen, I'll buy them – how much? I need three boxes' worth – send them to me now." I bought them from Eidos just because it was important to promote the best games. It didn't matter if they were also on the Saturn. There was definitely the perception that we had the best system and the best games. And I like to think in some way that the marketing and the way that we approached it had quite an impact as well.

STEVE LYCETT
I'd worked in games retail, and I'd actually felt a sense of games fatigue back then. You'd see waves of games copying a successful title, like millions of one-on-one fighters trying to the next *Street Fighter*. While I still loved games, I was lapsing away from them. Seeing the innovation and invention on the PlayStation, especially as this was sort of the dawn of 3D games, rekindled the passion and led to me applying for a job in the industry.

JASON BROOKES
The fact that Sony delivered on pretty much every promise with the first PlayStation – from the slick design of the machine and its unique controller and memory cards, to its cultivation of developer relationships and the creation of memorable software – ultimately laid the foundations for the PlayStation platform as it stands today.



Sony's networked game strategy may not be its strongest suit today, but in 1995 the ability to connect PS1s to play linked *Destruction Derby* felt like a bold statement about the value of multiplayer gaming on consoles



Outside of the home, the core PS1 tech still lives on today – albeit in small numbers – at the heart of Namco's *Tekken* coin-op cabinet

SHUHEI YOSHIDA
With its technology, PlayStation brought realtime 3D graphics to the hands of console videogame developers. 3D graphics had been used in the arcade and PC game market in limited game genres like space shooters and racing, but PlayStation democratised the use of 3D tech so that all genres of games took advantage, creating amazing new experiences like *Crash Bandicoot*, *Tomb Raider*, *Final Fantasy VII*, *Metal Gear Solid* and *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*.

In business terms, the adoption of CDs had a significant impact to the software business of the videogame industry. Before PlayStation, console games were sold on a cartridge that contained a mask ROM and took about three months to manufacture, costing over $10 per cartridge. Software publishers had to spend millions of dollars to produce the initial build of a game, only to see the game cartridges left unsold at retail or sold out without a way to quickly produce additional units. CDs significantly reduced the risk involved in making videogames, so new and smaller publishers were able to enter the market, and new and unproven concept games were greenlit.

In terms of culture, before PlayStation, videogames were largely considered toys for kids. PlayStation had a vision to make videogames entertainment for everyone, something cool to do and talk about among adults.

PlayStation believed in the talent and passion of videogame developers and focused on creating a platform where talented game creators could bring about exciting interactive experiences that were only possible on the platform. Without those amazing PlayStation games, the technology, the business model and the culture would not have meant as much as it did.

MASAYA MATSUURA
There were many Sony Music Entertainment alumni handling the software side of things. These people definitely had a major impact on how games were made, and even the types of games that were made and sold at the time. Things have changed since then, but I think that the PlayStation's design strategy has had a major impact on the industry over the years.

JENS MATTHIES
That Sony was able to go from a standing start to establishing the standard format for games was a monumental achievement. The PlayStation essentially re-established the videogame console as an alternative to the PC for the hardcore gamer.

ADAM SALTSMAN
If Sony can or should be credited with anything, it's the way the PlayStation deliberately broke from a number of conventions in the game industry in order to court a wider range of people with a wider range of interests. I think that kind of long-game diversity play was one of a handful of moments in the weird history of videogames that permanently changed the art form.

TRIP HAWKINS
The combination of cost-effective CD memory and outstanding 3D graphics allowed all of us to make the kind of games we had always dreamed of.

SHINJI MIKAMI
From the first PlayStation, I think we started to see more storytelling in games, which I think had a profound effect on how we viewed and interacted with games. I think people started to see the potential of where games could really take us. ■

COLLECTED WORKS

TED PRICE

DISRUPTOR
Publisher Universal Interactive Studios **Format** PlayStation **Release** 1996

SPYRO THE DRAGON
Publisher SCE **Format** PlayStation **Release** 1998

RATCHET & CLANK
Publisher SCE **Format** PS2 **Release** 2002

RESISTANCE: FALL OF MAN
Publisher SCE **Format** PS3 **Release** 2006

OUTERNAUTS
Publisher EA **Format** PC, iOS **Release** 2012

SUNSET OVERDRIVE
Publisher Microsoft **Format** Xbox One **Release** 2014

Insomniac's founder and CEO talks us through the definitive releases from his two decades in the videogame industry

By Ben Maxwell





Burbank-based Insomniac might never have existed were it not for *Doom*, which seems like a strange starting point for a studio that many know thanks to a purple dragon and a wombat-inspired alien with a tiny robot sidekick. Since its formative act of id homage, however, the studio has oscillated between the family-friendly vibe of *Ratchet & Clank* and *Spyro*, and the darker territory of the *Resistance* series and *Fuse*. But no matter how old the target audience is, every one of Insomniac's projects has been fuelled by the studio's constant desire to push against the limits of what can be achieved by an independent developer. Now, 20 years after founding the studio, **Ted Price** joins us to recall the key games and moments that have come to characterise Insomniac today.



"I REMEMBER DRIVING UP TO LA WITH OUR FIRST PLAYABLE, AND GETTING TOLD, 'THIS IS TERRIBLE'"

DISRUPTOR

Publisher Universal Interactive Studios **Format** PlayStation **Release** 1996

"For me, starting Insomniac was all about – at least at first – making a game that was similar to *Doom*. I was a big *Doom* fan, and my personal intent was to create a firstperson shooter on 3DO, because it was just out and presented the first opportunity for a garage developer to fund his or her own operation, since it was a relatively cheap platform to build on. And when my partners, Al and Brian Hastings, joined me in the summer of 1994, we went full bore into developing an FPS, which became *Disruptor*.

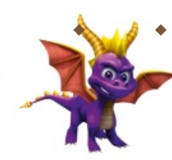
When we were developing, it was really low-tech. We didn't have any real 3D tools, so I would actually design the levels on graph paper and plot out all the points before they would be run through Brian's tools and Al's engine and we'd end up with 3D environments in space. That was how we built our first playable, and it was incredibly work intensive, but we were very proud of it.

At the time, we were working with Universal Interactive Studios as our publisher, and I remember driving up to Los Angeles with our first playable that we worked so hard on, and getting told, 'This is terrible; this is not a first playable. What are you guys thinking? You better turn it around.' And that's when we faced our first taste of the reality of the game development business: you have to be better than you think you are to succeed.

So we went back to the drawing board and rethought how we were making games, rethought how we were putting together our levels, rethought how we were approaching design. And we got a lot of help from a guy named Mark Cerny, who stepped in and said, 'Look, guys, if you want to make a firstperson shooter, this is how it should work.' He helped me figure out a better way to plan, and on a design side he helped all of us figure out a better way to lay out levels and think about enemy placement and weapon strategies.

He and his colleagues brought in a really talented production designer named Catherine Hardwicke, who was famous for Tank Girl at the time, and has gone on to do a lot of big films since. I remember meeting Catherine: she walked in and she had this hat on with a bird on it. I thought it was a real bird. She's just a real character, but she's also incredibly skilled at working with other artists and helping shape the vision for a movie or a game. And she really helped us get off the ground with the visuals for *Disruptor*. So those first two years of our existence, building *Disruptor*, I probably learned more than I had learned in the previous ten years doing anything else."









TOP ***Disruptor*** **built on *Doom*'s weapon focus with special powers called Psionics, which included the ability to heal, shock enemies or raise a shield.** RIGHT ***Ratchet & Clank*** **features a wide selection of exotic weaponry**

SPYRO THE DRAGON

Publisher SCE **Format** PlayStation **Release** 1998

"When we finished *Disruptor*, we released it to fairly good reviews, but there wasn't really any marketing done for the game and I remember seeing it called 'the best game that nobody's ever heard of' in a review [laughs]. And we realised that it was unlikely we would be able to do another *Disruptor*, because the audience wasn't there. Our team had grown to five people by then, and we felt like we needed to move in a different direction. We'd all been living in this sort of dark world of *Disruptor* – even though it was a little bit campy, it was a fairly dark story and a dark game – and we wanted to lighten things up a little bit.

Again, Mark Cerny, our executive producer at the time, said, 'Hey, guys, PlayStation is continuing to grow, but one area where it hasn't been able to succeed is the family-friendly market. Nintendo has a lock on that market. What could you guys do to break in?'

And so we went into our brainstorming mode, and one of our artists said, 'I've always wanted to do a game about a dragon.' All of us glommed onto that idea and we all had different visions. I mean, some of us were thinking about a giant dragon that sets cities on fire. Others were thinking about families of dragons and more of an RPG approach. Obviously, we ended up deciding that we wanted to have one playable dragon who was a cute anthropomorphic character rather than scary, and we worked with an artist named Charles Zembillas, who started fleshing out who this guy was.

I remember working directly with Charles when he was coming up with kind of an angry version of Spyro, and we had a lot of miscommunication as we tried to figure out his personality. We continued softening Spyro from this almost scary-looking small dragon to a much more approachable one. Then it became all about colour, and it's funny how you can have days of arguments over colour.

We went through every colour in the rainbow. We even went through multiple colours – we had rainbow Spyros – trying to figure out what the right colour was. I remember Craig Stitt was presenting all of us with different versions of Spyro and the one that really popped off the page was the one with the purple body and yellow horns and the yellow wings.

And that's where we collectively said, 'Yup, that's it, let's do it.' Those formative moments really do stand out for me. Like when Al got the brand-new engine up and running. He had been working on this tech which could draw long distances on PlayStation 1, which was something that most games hadn't been able to do. We put Spyro in this pastoral setting, where you could see a castle in the distance and this big hedge maze, and we had Spyro gliding over it, and it was another of those transformative moments for us.

It was a really fun game to make, because there were very few rules; we had an animator named Alain Maindron who would come up with these absolutely insane characters. I mean, one of the ones I remember in particular was this cave creature whose stomach was split down the middle and bats would fly out.

I think there were some characters that we ended up discarding on *Spyro: Year Of The Dragon* because we had made the move to introduce other playable characters, and we went through a lot of different iterations. The toughest one was the space monkey, Agent 9. It's so long ago, I'm having trouble remembering, but I do recall a lot of arguments over his laser, which may not have fit with the game, but we eventually put him in. My favourite playable character was Sergeant James Byrd, the penguin who flies around and drops bombs. You've got this militaristic penguin dropping bombs in a game about a dragon, right? But it fits."

RATCHET & CLANK

Publisher SCE **Format** PS2 **Release** 2002

"The reason why *Ratchet & Clank* really stands out to me is because it was the result of an almost disastrous ending for us. We had been working on a much more mature game for PlayStation 2, and we were at the point where we had to decide whether or not we were going to move ahead with it. We'd been talking to Sony about the project, and they came to us and said, 'Guys, we don't think this particular concept of yours is going to work. It's sort of in this middle ground between being adult and family-friendly – maybe you guys should go back to what you're really good at doing,' which at that point was platformers. I was the one who had been pushing heavily for this new game with a more mature approach, and the rest of the team thought I was nuts. So it was finally time for me to face the music and admit that I'd been wrong.

We discarded that game and went into brainstorming mode. We would have sessions where we'd get a keg and go up to the roof of our office in Burbank and try to figure out what the hell was next. That wasn't particularly successful, but in one of our smaller brainstorming sessions Brian Hastings, our creative officer, said, 'Let's do a game about a little character, akin to Marvin The Martian, who has crazy weapons and moves around from planet to planet.' And that's when the core idea for Ratchet was born. And within a couple weeks, we had changed from Marvin The Martian to a furry character with three robot sidekicks.

The initial idea was that Clank would be three robots, all of whom would attach to different appendages on Ratchet. One would ride on his back, one would be on his arm, and one would be on his leg. It was a cool concept, because we figured we could probably combine those robots at different times in the game and make this Transformers-esque sidekick, but it became really complicated, fast. We realised that we were sort of diluting the personality opportunity for Clank, and so Clank became Clank after a few more weeks and ended up riding on Ratchet's back in even our most early concepts.

Ratchet also went through some different concepts. At one point, he was a space lizard with a tail that would let him hang onto branches and do acrobatic moves, but that didn't work either. We wanted to be more approachable, so that was when the furry wombat emerged. But the next step was figuring out what the hell we were going to do that wasn't a platformer, because we wanted to move away from the collectathons that dominated the market at that point. So we went back to Brian's original idea, which was, 'Hey, let's have this character use lots of different weapons.'

The very first couple of weapons we built were the Pyrocitor and the Suck Cannon, which was this big weapon that sucks things in you can use as projectiles. That gun was our first realisation that we could go a little crazy with weapons in our games. Spyro didn't have any weapons, but Ratchet was an opportunity to take our creativity off on a new path. And with the Suck Cannon, it sort of opened up everybody's way of thinking, too – it encouraged everybody to move away from more traditional weapons and to continue to surprise ourselves, our publisher and our fans with this kind of craziness.

After that came the Agents Of Doom, which was another fun one. I remember that emerging in the first *Ratchet* game distinctly. But I vividly remember Captain Qwark and his appearance in the game.

I think the first cinematic that we did for the *Ratchet* series was the Al's Roboshack commercial. We wanted to come up with a way to present the story in a different way, as a sort of societal commentary. Captain Qwark's facing off against a big Blargian Snagglebeast, then we freeze frame and then he asks, 'Have you ever felt like you needed to upgrade your weapons?' But then we switch over to Al's Roboshack and you've got Qwark in all of his Qwark-tastic glory, with Jim Ward voicing him, doing his over-the-top delivery. And I remember seeing that and going, 'Yes! That's the tone! That is our sense of humour embodied in Captain Qwark.' For me, that moment really set the tone for the entire series.

What we were doing was trying to make each other laugh, really, and have fun. And we weren't thinking too much about whether or not gamers would find it appealing, because we're gamers, and we figured, 'Hey, if this is what gives us incentive to come into work every day and allows us to be creatively free, it's probably going to have an audience.'

God, I remember so many of the weapons. I mean, the Visibomb was another of my favourites. That was a weapon nobody thought we could do in the studio, because it broke all of our technology rules within the game. We needed players to stay within a certain distance of the ground because of how we built our levels, but the Visibomb let you fly up and see the edges of the world. So we had to come up with solutions for that, but it also ended up being a real control challenge, because guiding a cruise missile – and from firstperson perspective – is a big jump when you're used to playing a thirdperson character. So we spent a lot of time failing until it worked. But it still ended up being one of the most fun weapons, because there's this sense of mastery that you get when you finally figure out how to control it."

RESISTANCE

Publisher SCE **Format** PS3 **Release** 2006

"We'd been working on *Ratchet* for a long time [by the time PS3 was revealed to developers], through the entire PS2 lifecycle, and we were in the process of building *Deadlocked*, which for us was taking *Ratchet* in a new direction. We were ready to move into a different genre. So when we heard about PS3, we knew that the audience was going to be a more mature one from the beginning, because early adopters tend to be the shooter fans, really. We figured, OK, maybe it's time to go back to our original roots with a shooter and do something that's a little bit more gritty, a little bit darker.

The first conversation I remember about *Resistance* was about this scene in Starship Troopers where the protagonists are in a temporary encampment and they see these swarms of creatures coming over the hills towards them. We wanted to get that same feeling across in *Resistance* – you're completely outnumbered and you're faced with this alien menace that numbers in the hundreds of thousands.

We began the game as a space opera. For six months we were trying to figure out how to make this story about time travel, lizard-like enemies and space marine-esque characters work without being derivative and we were failing miserably. It just wasn't feeling good. And I remember in particular, Connie Yu, our producer at Sony, coming down and checking out one of the builds that we had been making for *Resistance* and saying, 'You know what, this isn't very fun. It'd be a lot more fun if you were fighting against humans.' I had a fairly negative reaction, going, 'God, you know what, we worked so hard on these damn lizards. I just don't want to remove them from the game.' But she was right.

At the same time, we didn't want to make a WWII shooter, because those were in vogue at the time and it seemed like every shooter had you fighting against other humans, and so we didn't want to do that either. We were struggling. But then we began creating this story about the Chimera, this race that had seeded Earth with these giant structures that were underground and had suddenly emerged earlier than what would have been WWII, and had begun converting humans into these humanoid creatures.

When we started talking about that story, that really grabbed everybody. It was a much more grounded approach than what we had been trying before, and we wanted to present something that felt familiar but different. So the story started talking about how the emergence of the Chimera would prevent the start of WWII. That's when the theme of the game began gaining traction. But before we even got to that point, we'd also gone down a different path where we decided that this would be a WWI game, until we realised that WWI weapons weren't particularly compelling. So that's when we decided to place the game in our own version of the 1950s.

I remember arguing incessantly over the very first gameplay sequence in the first *Resistance*, where we land you in York and you fight down the street without any health. There are no health pickups, and this is before you get your regenerative powers. I had been pushing really hard to make sure that we didn't introduce those powers early, because I wanted to make sure that we explained why Hale suddenly has the ability to regen health. But we couldn't do that until he was infected by the Chimera, so we had to have a part of the game where he was just a pure human. At the same time, we didn't want to have this different health mechanic that we only give you for five or ten minutes of the game, so what ended up happening was we hit players with a sledgehammer as soon as they started, which is the total wrong way to make a game [laughs]. I thought it was easy because I'd played it 100 times, but I remember watching people after we got pretty close to the finish point and thinking, 'Oh my God. What do we do? People are going to be so pissed at us!' There were people pissed, but there were a lot of people who gutted it out and got to the regenerative power."

OUTERNAUTS

Publisher EA **Format** PC, iOS **Release** 2012

"*Outernauts* started out as a small Facebook game but ended up being one of the largest games we've made in terms of the geography and number of characters in the game. It was a big, sprawling game, but most people didn't realise it, because we used 2D art and it looked like a more traditional Facebook game. Even so, we had a lot of fans who really got into exploring the worlds that we presented

in *Outernauts* and you could do a lot. But then when Facebook began to decline in terms of gaming popularity, we knew we had to change direction. Mobile had been exploding and we wanted to move into that field and learn more about the market and what players wanted.

So the team looked inward and asked, 'What is it that makes *Outernauts* special? What can we do that will bring that same magic to the mobile audience without creating something that simply won't work on mobile?' And it became all about the beasts. We began going nuts with them, and one of the core elements that emerged was beast breeding, and that has become a really important mechanic for the mobile game. For us, it's been a blast, because of the complexity of breeding: there are lots of different families of beasts, lots of different types, from common to uncommon to rare to epic to legendary. And we introduced a bunch of new mechanics that were surprising even to us: beast fusion, the crystallisation of beasts, etc. Being able to dive deep on mechanics like that in a genre that isn't necessarily deep was fun for the team, but it was also a way for us to bring some of Insomniac's gameplay to that audience."

SUNSET OVERDRIVE

Publisher Microsoft **Format** Xbox One **Release** 2014

"Marcus Smith and Drew Murray came up with the concept for *Sunset Overdrive* at the end of *Resistance 3*. Drew had been the lead designer on that game, and Marcus was the creative director. They teamed up with the desire to do something different and that really spoke to Insomniac's strengths as a studio – that wild stylisation and humour.

They presented this game that was full of tone and style to a bunch of us and we all really glommed onto it. But then at one point, we switched direction… We did this for various reasons, but it became apparent to me that *Sunset Overdrive* really was the game we were supposed to be making. When we came back to it, we brought our revised vision of the game up to Microsoft. Drew and Marcus made one of the most impassioned presentations I've ever seen, and it culminated with Drew jumping up onto a boardroom table and pretending to surf, describing one of the mechanics in the game, and it was… amazing. I think everybody's jaws in the room dropped, because you don't do that in a presentation! But he was sort of embodying the tone of the game.

One of my strongest memories was when traversal started working. I recall thinking, 'There's no way that we're going to figure out how to make combat and grinding work,' because as a shooter fan, and somebody who develops shooters, I'm so used to the more traditional stick to the ground, aim, fire, go to cover, right? That's what we're all used to, and to try to envision how you could be grinding on a wire at incredible speeds but then also accurately shooting enemies that are several meters below you didn't make any sense. And it didn't make sense to a lot of people on the team until [lead designer] Cameron Christian and our designers really dug in and began examining the metrics and the aiming mechanics for the game, and asking what really would make this fun? Why is it currently frustrating? Why are people throwing their controllers when they have to grind and shoot?

It took a lot of collaboration between Cameron and our gameplay programmers to figure out the magic combination. And it turned out to be a combination of speed, and pulling some tricks behind the scenes for aiming and enemy behaviour. And we started building on that with the Style system. I can't remember who proposed it, it might have been Drew, but we needed a reason to get people grinding. It's not enough to just say, 'Oh, it's fun to balance and grind from wires.' Sure, that's fun for a while, but at some point you need to be rewarded for it. So everyone racked their brains until the Style system was born.

As for going back to *Resistance*, because we're independent and we're IP creators, I've learned to say never say never. I do feel that with *Sunset Overdrive*, *Outernauts*, and *Ratchet & Clank* going on right now, there's a sense of optimism for us, because we're working on games that are seriously fun to create, games that have far fewer rules than realistic games. And as creators there's nothing better to feel like than that you can experiment and whatever you come up with will probably fit in these crazy worlds that you're creating." ■



"THE VISIBOMB WAS ANOTHER OF MY FAVOURITES. THAT WAS A WEAPON NOBODY THOUGHT WE COULD DO"







TOP *Resistance: Fall Of Man* saw Insomniac return to its FPS roots as you fight to repel the invading Chimera. ABOVE The studio's first game for a non-Sony platform was *Outernauts*, a social RPG in which you breed monsters for battle

THE MAKING OF...



NO MORE HEROES

How losers everywhere influenced Suda51's seminal offbeat action game

By Daniel Robson

Format Wii
Publisher Marvelous Entertainment (JP), Ubisoft (NA), Rising Star Games (EU)
Developer Grasshopper Manufacture
Origin Japan
Debut 2007

Everything began with Travis Touchdown. One of gaming's most unlikely antiheroes, Touchdown's tale is of an American otaku idiot who decides to use the beam katana he wins in an online auction to become a top-ranked killer and impress a girl, and it was the first bit of *No More Heroes* to pop into being. Once **Goichi 'Suda51' Suda** came up with his lead, based loosely on Jackass goofball-in-chief Johnny Knoxville, everything else followed.

"I wanted Travis to be like a big schoolboy who sometimes jokes around and is sometimes deeply serious, and who loves to fight," Suda tells us in the meeting room of Grasshopper's Tokyo office – itself as cluttered with character figures, DVDs and pop-culture ephemera as Touchdown's own motel room. "Travis is a little similar to me. If I had been an American otaku, what kind of life would I have led? Of course, I'd have been a top-ranked assassin," Suda laughs. "He's a very human character, and one that fits within an action game."

So everything began with Touchdown – except that perhaps it all started with *Killer7*. Suda's 2005 GameCube collaboration with Shinji Mikami was a violent action game with heavily stylised cel-shaded visuals and a deep combat system, clearly laying the path that *No More Heroes* would travel. And despite a mixed critical reception, *Killer7* became a cult classic in the west, prepping a fanbase for Touchdown's madcap debut. Released on Wii in December 2007 in Japan and a few months later overseas, *No More Heroes* would cement Suda and Grasshopper Manufacture's reputation for offbeat action, but it didn't establish it.

Suda admits to us that his memory is hazy, but by his recollection the game was conceived sometime in early 2005, shortly before the release of *Killer7*. More significantly, the idea came some months before the unveiling of Wii at that year's E3, and its controller at Tokyo Game Show a few months later. *No More Heroes* had originally been intended for 360, "but then we saw the Wii Remote", Suda recalls. "It seemed perfect for the beam katana."

Named after a song and album by The Stranglers and infused with punk attitude, *No More Heroes* is a game of boss battles, of learning enemy patterns and knowing when to attack or defend. It allows players to brandish the Wii Remote as a laser sword, holding it high or low and pressing A for corresponding attacks, with the Nunchuk for movement. Although the original Wii Remote could not offer perfect parity with sword swings, *No More Heroes* still ended up being a better lightsaber sim than any Star Wars game, combining physical action and precision timing to great effect. And the bizarre addition of wrestling throws only made the game more appealing.



The parry system proved tricky to master, bringing a dash of additional complexity and risk to the combat system

"TRAVIS IS A LITTLE SIMILAR TO ME. IF I HAD BEEN AN AMERICAN OTAKU, WHAT KIND OF LIFE WOULD I HAVE LED?"

It wasn't easy to perfect this fight system, though. "We didn't know how to program for the Wii controller yet, and making it slash the way we wanted was extremely challenging," says battle programmer **Toru Hironaka**. "It took a long time to make it feel satisfying."

"We found that attacking with only motion control was exhausting, so that's when we added the use of the A button," Suda adds. "We made about four or five iterations before we nailed the combat."

Touchdown earns newer and stronger beam katanas throughout the game, but his abilities are nonetheless hampered by a brilliant bit of balancing: the weapons all run on batteries. Attacking and blocking wear down the power, which can be charged by scarce power-ups or by pushing the 1 button and shaking the Remote vigorously, leaving Touchdown vulnerable to attack. Suda says that this limitation was a way to stop the combat becoming too easy.

"I owned a flashlight that you could shake to recharge its battery," he says. "I thought a motion like that would suit the Wii Remote, and it also looks like, uh…" He mimes waggling the controller near his crotch, laughing. "That kind of motion is very Travis."

Its controls are only part of what make the game such a joy to play, with much of the appeal coming from the parade of colourful boss battles. Inspired by the duels in the 1970 cult film El Topo, the premise is that in order to work his way up the leaderboard of the United Assassins Association (UAA), Touchdown has to enter fights against ten killers. This progression is soon disrupted by story twists, but reaching the next eccentric boss and figuring out his or her weakness proves a powerful draw.

Taking inspiration from American subcultures such as superhero comics and the sexually charged female archetypes of a thousand B-movies, these memorable antagonists include singing cowboy Dr Peace, who Touchdown fights in a baseball stadium (Hironaka: "It's hard to get close to him in the stadium, which made it a unique battle"); Holly Summers, a soldier with a prosthetic leg who has dug invisible pit traps in the beach on which they duel (Hironaka: "Those traps drove some people *crazy*"); and Bad Girl, a blonde bombshell who uses her stable of loyal gimps to grief you (Suda: "People still cosplay as her today").

But Suda is a master of subverting expectations, and not every fight ends as the game's structure might have dictated. After a lengthy build-up, for instance, Letz Shake and his gargantuan Earthquake Maker get sliced in half by yet another adversary in anticlimactic yet comical fashion. "The development schedule was looking tight, and there were so many boss battles already, so I decided to write the Letz Shake fight out of the script," Suda laughs.

The game was also originally due to end with Touchdown's death at the hands of Sylvia, the UAA agent who used her sexuality to manipulate him throughout the game. After the final ranked match, she was to shoot him – but her charm was considered deadly enough.

"Sylvia knows she's sexy and she uses it as a weapon," says senior character artist ▶

Takashi Kasahara. "She was an easy character to model because her personality was so strong. It wasn't my intention when I made her, but early in development someone commented that she reminded them of Scarlett Johansson."

With so much violence, sexual innuendo and swearing in the English-only script, it seems almost incredible that *No More Heroes* was originally a Wii exclusive. But since the small team of around 30 was building the game with its own bespoke engine over a cycle of less than two years, it was just too difficult to develop it for multiple platforms. And in any case, Suda insists the platform holder made no complaints about the content.

"They were very supportive, especially Nintendo Of America and Nintendo Of Europe," he says. "In Japan and also in Europe, we released a lighter version, where the heads don't fly like they do in the American version. The mature content was only in the American version."

Besides, the violence is tempered by playful presentation, *No More Heroes* putting its heritage front and centre by implementing a mishmash of retro styles. Touchdown's energy is a pixellated heart-shaped gauge; the post-boss scoreboards resemble something from an '80s arcade cabinet, and sound effects include bleeps and bloops reminiscent of 8bit Nintendo games.

"Travis is an otaku, and those elements were little peepholes into his world," Suda says. "For *No More Heroes*, I wanted to mix up all kinds of cultures, including videogames."

As for the cel-shaded visuals, Suda says using strong light and shadow was a thematic choice. Kasahara also draws a link to Suda's legacy: "Since it was a game about an assassin, we wanted to reference *Killer7*, which also used cel-shading. But it wouldn't be interesting if it looked exactly the same, so we made it look grittier."

The game's one major flaw is its hub world. In between ranked fights, Touchdown can explore the town of Santa Destroy, visiting locations where he can learn new skills, upgrade his beam katana or buy clothes. But Santa Destroy is a ghost town, a sparsely populated and eerily quiet open world. Unlike the swordplay, Touchdown's chunky Schpeltiger motor scooter is clumsy, with poor collision detection, while popup in Santa Destroy is extreme. The result looks cheap, and Suda knows it. "I wanted to do more, but we didn't have time and the budget wasn't that big," he says. "That was the limit of what we could do."

Q&A



Goichi Suda
CEO, Grasshopper Manufacture

Did the game turn out as planned?
I think we managed to achieve almost everything we wanted to with *No More Heroes*, including having a stab at an open-world game. With a small team, we managed to put together all sorts of ideas and make a great game. I think we all felt that way.

What would you do differently if you had the chance to go back?
There were a lot of bugs in the UI. And the challenge of making an open world… It was supposed to be a small town, but I wanted it to be more of a mix [of activities], and on the current generation we can do that. But it's actually more of a closed world, a small town where people live their lives, so I would like to have made more of that concept.

Why did you let Shinobu live after her defeat?
I wanted to have one character who was a bit like Travis' apprentice, or a level below him, and Shinobu seemed like the right one. She became a very interesting character, I think.

Defeated enemies explode into a shower of coins, an effect that was also used in the Scott Pilgrim Vs The World movie.
We were first! We tried it out and it felt good to have those coins go *kerching, kerching, kerching*. It was very effective. I met [Scott Pilgrim director] Edgar Wright and he told me himself it wasn't plagiarism!

Despite starring in a Nintendo exclusive, Travis had a fondness for rival hardware.
Yes, he has a Mega Drive and a Mega CD. Travis is a hardcore gamer, so he'd be into Sega hardware rather than Nintendo [laughs].

Still, the open-world section does serve a purpose, which is to act as a palate cleanser. To earn entry into the boss fights, players have to undertake deliberately monotonous part-time jobs, such as collecting coconuts from trees or mowing the lawn – tasks based on numbing repetition.

"During the fight sections, you tense up and have to be alert, so in the open-world section you can take it easy," Suda says. "Travis doesn't just fight; he also has to live his life… If you have to work a job, it makes you look forward to the fights even more."

Ultimately, the combat proved so addictive and the presentation so charming that many critics and players found it easy to forgive the game's shortcomings. "It reviewed better than we'd expected, which made us very happy," Suda says. "We thought the game was fun to play with the Wii Remote, but we weren't sure how the public would take to it. It's such a strange game, and Travis is an idiot, so I wondered how it would fare overseas. But in the end the reaction was even better in the US and Europe than in Japan."

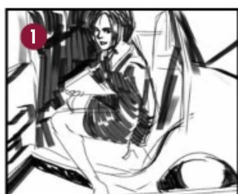
Indeed, the original Wii version of the game sold some 290,000 copies in North America and 160,000 in Europe, plus a less-than-thrilling 40,000 in Japan. A sequel, *No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle*, was quickly confirmed, again exclusive to Wii, and the original game was ported to PS3 and Xbox 360 as *No More Heroes: Heroes' Paradise* (handled by Japanese publisher Marvelous Entertainment and Feelplus).

Grasshopper rarely makes sequels, preferring to focus on new IP where possible, but although he had been so close to killing off his hero for good, Suda says he was eager to return to Touchdown's weird little world for *Desperate Struggle*. "*No More Heroes* was a smash hit as far as we were concerned, and I wanted to return to it and to make it a series over which we would take great care," he says. "I often get asked to make a third game. Right now we're busy with *Let It Die*, but Travis is a character we could even return to in ten years' time. When the timing is right, I'd like to do so."

In addition to spawning a sequel, *No More Heroes* expanded on what Grasshopper had begun with *Killer7*, framing it as a top-rate action-game studio with a subculture streak and setting in motion a loosely linked 'series' of thematically similar titles, including 2012's giddily gaudy zombie slasher *Lollipop Chainsaw* and 2013's dark but grandiose *Killer Is Dead*.

Suda knows he owes it all to Touchdown – and he feels that in the assassin lies not only a bit of himself and Johnny Knoxville, but also a bit of all of us. "Travis is a loser who eventually finds purpose," Suda says. "OK, it's as a killer, but in his chosen field he grows stronger and finds success. And as his fighting skills increase, so does his spirit. It's a story about growing up. We all have to fight in our daily lives and to try hard, and by doing so our horizons become broader.

"Travis is a fighter, and he always looks forward to the next challenge. I wanted to make a game that would inspire players to feel excited about life." ■

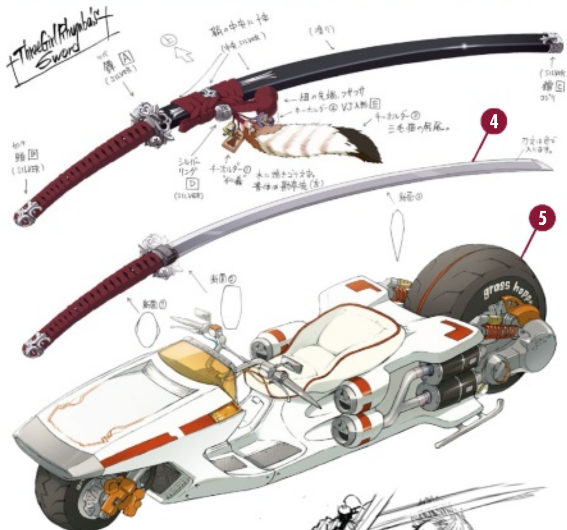














1 Early storyboards show how defined the characters were, even at the beginning. **2** The cel-shaded style was a deliberate nod to previous Grasshopper title *Killer7*. **3** The small team imposed some limitations, not least of which was a single format. **4** The Three Girl Rhumba's Sword belied owner Shinobu's schoolgirl status, with its collection of cute charms dangling from the scabbard. **5** The Schpeltiger motor scooter was Touchdown's main mode of transportation around the open world, though its handling was atrocious. **6** "I'm a loser, baby, so why don't I kill you": the character of Travis Touchdown arrived more or less fully formed in director Goichi Suda's head. **7** The idea for sword-based combat came first, but the unveiling of the Wii Remote gave it an ideal platform

STUDIO PROFILE

UBISOFT MONTREAL

The flagship studio talks controversy, experimentation and open worlds

BY ANDY ROBINSON





Founded 1997
Employees 2,600
Key staff Yannis Mallat (CEO), Lionel Raynaud (VP of creative), Patrick Plourde (creative director, *Child Of Light*), Alex Hutchinson (creative director, *Far Cry 4*)
URL www.montreal.ubisoft.com
Selected softography *Assassin's Creed, Splinter Cell, Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time, Far Cry 4, Assassin's Creed Unity*
Current projects *Rainbow Six Siege*

So far, 2014 has been a difficult year for the leadership of Ubisoft Montreal. The flagship developer of *Assassin's Creed* and *Far Cry* has barely been able to escape one controversy before yet another brouhaha ensnares it, with accusations of sexism, graphical downgrades and overly strict DRM ricocheting across the Internet. It can't even show off a game's boxart without then having to publicly explain why it isn't racist.

A few instances of questionable messaging haven't helped the studio's image, but it's also had to weather the inflammatory effect of online interactions. Studio CEO **Yannis Mallat**, a 15-year Ubisoft veteran who has been head of Montreal since 2006, accepts that when your creations reach an audience of upwards of ten million, you're bound to receive some negativity.

"These things happen – they'll always be there," Mallat says. "Our games reach a lot of people, so I guess it's normal to have things said about these creations. I think that human nature is such that we usually talk more about what could be seen as bad, rather than good.

"That's too bad, because in the world there are many good things, but we're OK with that. What we're not OK with is when there are things said that are not true and that touch on very sensitive subjects that are absolutely not our intentions. I think that the people that say those things need to exert themselves to know more about what we do in general, rather than just looking at one issue in a game."

And Ubisoft does put a great deal of thought into marketing and positioning its games, often successfully. The proof is plain to see: a mixed critical reception and a helping of controversy over graphical quality didn't stop Ubisoft shipping eight million copies of Montreal's *Watch Dogs* to retailers in under two months – an industry record at the time for new IP. Outlandish fairytale RPG *Child Of Light* also found an audience after being pitched as a small indie title, despite the game being made by one of the biggest development houses in the world.

Much of this is undoubtedly thanks to Ubisoft's Paris editorial team, profiled in **E**266, which scrutinises and approves every aspect of projects in development. But credit must also go to the unseen but influential brand managers, a band of marketers embedded within each game development team. Ubisoft's wider corporate obsession with fusing communications and creative departments is what most distinguishes Montreal from its many neighbouring studios –



Ubisoft Montreal's CEO, Yannis Mallat (left). Lionel Raynaud joined Montreal from the company's Parisian editorial team

"We were the first," Mallat is keen to stress – though credit is also deserved for the Canadian studio's own culture of nurturing talent from within.

At 2,600 employees, Ubisoft Montreal is one of the biggest developers in the industry, and its main five-floor building, a former textile factory, and nearby offices feel more like a college campus than your average place of work. Opened in 1997, following the lure of generous Canadian tax credits, Ubisoft Montreal is now the focal point of the publisher's sprawling international studio network, helming a long list of the industry's biggest-selling series. The sprawling development teams for *Assassin's Creed* and *Far Cry* occupy entire floors of Montreal's red-brick HQ, but recently the studio has made headlines as much for its smaller passion projects as its thousand-strong productions. 1980s-themed *Far Cry 3* spinoff DLC *Blood Dragon* and Patrick Plourde's *Child Of Light* both show a willingness to indulge in creative risks alongside the yearly iterations of proven moneyspinners.

SMALLER RELEASES REPRESENT AN OUTLET FOR EXPERIMENTATION, AS WELL REINVIGORATING EXPERIENCED STAFF

The latter game has been a self-proclaimed success for Montreal, resulting in its developers being installed as a core team. For the studio at large, these smaller releases represent an outlet for experimentation, as well as a means of reinvigorating the studio's most experienced staff after extensive spins in the blockbuster cycle. The pattern was set by Patrick Plourde, the veteran designer and creative director who had led development on the likes of *Rainbow Six Vegas 2*, *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* and *Far Cry 3*, and who was seeking a new challenge following years spent making Ubisoft blockbusters.

"We understood that it took a lot of energy to release big games like that," explains creative VP **Lionel Raynaud**, a veteran of 14 years who oversees content for all of Ubisoft's games. "[Plourde] pitched us the creative idea and we said yes. We were proud to deliver something new and unique – a lot of people were surprised that Montreal was delivering this kind of game. The team learned a lot about RPG mechanics during development and this has resulted in us creating a core team. The people who made this game want to work together again, whether it's on a small game or not." Plourde has since moved on to a new project, separate from the *Child Of Light* team, while another of the studio's senior creatives, *Far Cry 4* lead Alex Hutchinson, has had a similarly personal project greenlit.

"I think it's super-interesting to create this rhythm in the careers of creative guys, allowing them to work on triple-A games and then do something different and then maybe go back," says Raynaud. "This dynamic has incredible value in the industry and it's what we want to do: create core teams that want to make great games. If only for that, it's a huge benefit. We will encourage other initiatives like *Child Of Light*, and there's a chance that we will have many more games like that in the future."

Although Ubisoft Montreal is financially dependant on the success of its blockbuster sequels, Mallat says it's important that the firm isn't reliant on its biggest projects as its sole sources of innovation. "It is important to try new things. That being said, you're touching on a ▶





Ubisoft Montreal has several development teams spread across a former textile factory, with some of its biggest games taking up entire open-plan floors. The colossal red-brick structure also houses a dedicated playtesting lab, a mixing room and its own foley studio

very interesting point in terms of managing creativity: it's important for those [smaller] projects not to be suffocated at the beginning by high-pressure objectives. That's where part of my job is really interesting, because it's a question of growing the talent that we've noticed, giving them a chance and managing the risk and trying new things without breaking the balance of delivering the expected big projects."

It sounds appealing when put like that, but is the studio any less risk-averse these days, or simply better at compartmentalising its gambles? Ubisoft Montreal has built a reputation on its diverse portfolio of artistic styles, but mechanically its big-name releases are increasingly fixated on the familiar structures of systemic open-world play that have brought the company so much success in the past. Towers to scale that unlock sections of map, outposts to clear of resistance, distractions and collectibles aplenty on the minimap: all are familiar to players in 2014, and many are parts of a formula that Ubisoft has evolved and perfected since the original *Assassin's Creed*. But overexposure has bred a growing disdain at the company's dedication to this admittedly effective template.

There are whispers, however, that the company's creatives are prepared to make some changes, most specifically to the way narrative plays out within Ubisoft's overworked open-world framework. Mallat calls it one of his studio's "most interesting" current challenges. "I think the open-world structure allows for every kind of experience to exist, and we can clearly see that with *Far Cry*, *Assassin's Creed* and *Watch Dogs*," he says. "They are all different types of games, but with open worlds we have the conviction that we are answering players' needs, even if they are not clearly expressed, in the way that they like to be immersed in worlds.

"We don't ask our teams to make an open world – we want to switch from making story-driven games to creating 'worlds'. In terms of creation, it really is two different things; we want our teams to create worlds in a very cohesive and coherent way, within which there will be many stories to tell."

Mallat insists that despite a willingness to explore a different approach with storytelling, Montreal is as dedicated to building narratives as it ever was, only in future it wants to experiment with having player actions shape the experience, as opposed to the linear rhythms of *Watch Dogs* and *Assassin's Creed*. Crucially, there are also signs that it's preparing to extend the pipelines of these key series, with leadership of one future *Assassin's Creed* instalment officially handed over to Montreal's neighbouring Quebec City studio, a move it says will give teams at the flagship studio more time to experiment with the series it created.

"We want the player's agenda within the game world to rule their own experience. I think it answers the player's need to spend more time within games and it also allows many ways to carry the messages that our creatives want to broadcast," Mallat says. "We used to say that after you've played a Ubisoft game, we want you to be left with something to think about – about you or the world. That's a process that needs to take time, within which you need to reflect or think. In order for that to really change something inside you, everything you do in the game needs to have an impact. That's very important for us, because we see that as a way to make our creations more mature and profound. By just telling a story, maybe we'll miss that objective."

Ubisoft Montreal's management team will be the first to admit that its somewhat unorthodox approach to development isn't fault-proof, but company culture puts heavy emphasis on learning from past mistakes, rather than never making them, as is evident from the number of times it has followed up a disappointing release with a winner. But where other publishing giants can come across as inherently mechanical in their approach to the game development, Ubisoft's philosophies feel undeniably human, and like any human, sometimes it can slip up.

THE CULTURE PUTS HEAVY EMPHASIS ON LEARNING FROM PAST MISTAKES, RATHER THAN NEVER MAKING THEM

It's testament to this ethos that, even though it is 17 years old, the studio still sees itself as having a lot to learn, and is still trying to perfect the balance between words and actions in an occasionally harsh environment. "We used to say that the foundation myth of this studio is to be very young – and the average age here is young," Mallat tells us. "Of course, when you have 2,600 people, it's hard to keep that average down. But it's still part of how we see the world through our games. I do think that when you join our studio, you feel that it's unique. Over time, we are still managing to master the balance [of business and production], because the studio is only a teenager. We're not a baby any more, but we're certainly maturing." ■










1 *Watch Dogs* was a commercial success for Montreal, but DLC *Bad Blood* swaps Aiden Pearce for the more likeable Raymond 'T-Bone' Kenney.
2 *Splinter Cell* (2002) was Montreal's first homegrown franchise. Its most recent iteration was 2010's *Conviction.*
3 *Assassin's Creed* veteran Patrick Plourde directed *Child Of Light*. He's moved on, but the core team remains.
4 *Far Cry 3* sees a small group of thrill-seekers stranded on a pirate-infested island. The Montreal team has expressed regret over the decision to kill off charismatic villain Vaas.
5 *Far Cry 4*'s powder aesthetic – which appears in-game and in ads – is an example of the consistency Montreal encourages across game production and marketing teams.
6 *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* iterated on the naval warfare introduced in its predecessor



PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Destiny 360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One
Bungie's insistence that it is listening to player feedback is hard to reconcile with its treatment of the Vault Of Glass. Ignoring a swarm of nasty bugs, the studio focused on changing a key mechanic in the final boss fight, adding more randomisation to a game that is already as good as defined by RNG. The raid is still fantastic, and the game remains irresistible, but Bungie can only abuse its players' goodwill for so long.

Minecraft PC, 360, PS3, PS4, Vita, Xbox One
Until recently, the idea that Mojang would sell to anyone at all was anathema, let alone that the buyer would be Microsoft. But despite the corporate changes behind the scenes – the deal was officially signed off this month – construction of our small castle compound continues apace and without interruption. It doesn't really matter who owns the game when the world already feels like a second home to us.

The Binding Of Isaac: Rebirth PC, PS4, Vita
Edmund McMillen's remake of his Flash game, *Rebirth* expands the original's macabre adventure with additional bosses, enemies and items. Returning foes have also been retuned and feature more varied behaviour, and a new weapon combo system gives you the chance to create new tools as the cumulative effects of your items stack up. We can confidently say that we've never had this much fun fleeing from a knife-wielding relative.



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

Freedom of movement

The way we look at videogame worlds is dictated by the character under our control. In *GTA*, your eyes usually fall on the nearest car, then the road ahead, and, intermittently, the GPS in the screen's bottom corner. In *Assassin's Creed*, your eyes dart upwards, plotting a course from window frame to cornice to rooftops, from which you take the straightest route to your destination.

In *Sunset Overdrive* (p104), you look everywhere at once. There is no correct route in a game where absolutely everything can be grabbed, swung on, grinded or bounced off. It is liberating, and quite overwhelming at first, every bit as refreshing as the first time you made Altaïr clamber up the side of a building. As a simple exercise in the joy of locomotion, *Sunset Overdrive* is a delight.

So too is *Call Of Duty: Advanced Warfare* (p112), in which Sledgehammer Games does to the most rigidly defined template in games what Insomniac has done for open-world play. *COD* has always been about an objective marker and the enemies in between, and that's still the case here, but the Exo suit's toys and moveset put a fresh spin on this tired old formula. And that goes triple for *LittleBigPlanet 3* (p108), with its new characters adding inventive tweaks to Sackboy's distinctive platforming.



A little fresh thinking can go a long way in livening up something established, but the execution is as important as the inspiration. That's something that was clearly lost on *Lords Of The Fallen* (p116) devs Deck13 and CI Interactive. Their game wants so desperately to be *Dark Souls* that it can only suffer from the comparison, and while some of its new ideas are additive, they come at the cost of misinterpreting what made its idol so rare. As such, Harkyn's abilities have little bearing on how we look at the world beyond making us wish we were playing the game *LOTF* seeks to imitate.

Sunset Overdrive

Publisher Microsoft
Developer Insomniac Games
Format Xbox One
Release Out now

The dialogue in *Sunset Overdrive* may be peppered with profanity, but there's one word conspicuously absent from its vocabulary: restraint. Insomniac's noisy, boisterous Xbox One exclusive turns everything up to 11, starting with its hyper-saturated colours. Its gaudy sandbox is strewn with clutter – there are no fewer than seven collectible types, each of which functions as a different form of currency. Indeed, it's so densely stuffed with things to do, see, shoot and pick up, its map pockmarked with icons and waypoints, that Ubisoft will surely be taking notes.

By genre standards, it gets down to business in satisfyingly brisk fashion. An energy drink, Overcharge Delirium XT, has transformed Sunset City's population into pustular mutants, and its maker, Fizzco, has locked down the city in a massive cover-up, erecting energy barriers to prevent people from escaping. A clutch of survivors remain alongside a larger group of scavengers and Fizzco's own robotic cabal, which use electric-blue blades and bullets to deal with troublemakers.

The regular freaks, AKA OD, lollop after you, lunging forward and attacking with vicious melee swipes. Should they slurp down any more Overcharge, they'll metamorphose into Poppers, creatures covered in tartrazine growths. These must be burst from a safe distance lest they get too close and explode in your face. The giant Herkers, meanwhile, throw large objects and smaller mutants from excavator scoops embedded in their swollen arms. All will shear large chunks from your health gauge if you're not careful, and given that your unnamed avatar is incapable of breaking into anything more than a gentle jog on foot, you're strongly encouraged to stay off the ground.

Initially, at least, that's quite the challenge. From the outset, you're able to grind across just about any horizontal edge, whether it's railings, the side of a truck, or a rooftop, plus you can ride on overhead wires, or dangle beneath them from a hook. Alternatively, you can bounce upon cars, parasols, awnings and bushes, though you'll most often use these to reach a higher place from which to grind. Changing direction is a simple matter of pushing the analogue stick and pressing X; a tap alone enough to flip from over- to undergrinds and vice versa.

For the most part, then, you'll be aiming downward while in constant motion. Sniper rifles are obviously out of the question, while area-of-effect munitions are in. You'd expect an inventive arsenal from a studio that made its name crafting unusual ordnance for the *Ratchet & Clank* and *Resistance* games, and you'd be right to, though most are analogous to familiar firearms. The TNTeddy, which fires explosive soft toys, is a grenade launcher in all but name, while Insomniac is careful to assuage the fears of any Xbox owners unaccustomed to such an outlandish arsenal, amusingly likening a weapon that shoots fireworks to an assault rifle.

It's so densely stuffed with things to do, see, shoot and pick up that Ubisoft will surely be taking notes



Meanwhile, successful traversals between grinds and bounces build a Style meter, which allows you to augment your moves courtesy of equippable buffs, here termed Amps. Hit the first tier and your dodge-rolls will damage enemies you collide with, or you might opt for a forcefield that prevents mutant swipes from connecting. The second tier may see your melee attacks produce a fireball or tornado, while the third could result in a spray of shrapnel from divebomb attacks. Some Amps are purely cosmetic, however, with one causing foes to explode into glittering confetti.

You could cut a decent trailer from the highlights of the first few hours, but it would create a misleading impression of the awkward, messy opening. Chaining moves is straightforward enough, but when you're facing a group of mutants capable of leaping to your level and assaulting you from multiple directions, you'll spend a lot of time wrestling desperately with the camera, often grinding back and forth across the same edge or in a circle while regularly pulling up the radial weapon menu because you're out of ammo. Some would argue limiting supplies encourages experimentation, but at times it's dispiritingly disempowering.

It hardly helps that Insomniac is so desperately keen to ensure you're not missing anything that it assails you with information, all but overwhelming you in the process. Then, of course, you've got all those collectibles to contend with: money for clothes, hats and accessories; drinks cans for weapons, ammunition and maps that show you the locations of the other five object types. You'll need the latter, too: the pace is so relentless and the aesthetic so bright and busy that it's easy to miss items. More often than not, we collected them accidentally, gliding backwards over a pair of shoes trailing from a wire while escaping a horde of OD.

Soon you'll be told that certain activities will earn you badges that convey additional perks, and in case you'd forgotten about any of this, text overlays will remind you that it's been five minutes since you last hit the menu button. Occasionally, your avatar will even chip in that you haven't purchased a new gun for a while. About six hours in, we were presented with a tutorial for the wall-run mechanic, arriving at least three hours after we'd mastered it.

Still, the simple joy of locomotion is enough to compensate for this aggressive handholding. Movement is sharp and responsive, with a generous degree of freedom when airborne and just the right amount of stickiness for grinding. Once you've unlocked a high bounce and an air dash, which perhaps should be available earlier, you'll be racing between objectives without ever touching down. Sunset City is quite the sprawl, but while a fast-travel option between key locations is available, by hour seven you'll never feel ▶



ABOVE Many missions follow a similar pattern, asking you to complete an elaborate obstacle course on your way to destroy or retrieve a given number of items, while being attacked. Not that it matters much when the action is conducted at such a breathless clip. **LEFT** The weapon menu handily informs you which enemies each gun is best used against. Fizzco's robots can withstand a fair old beating, but they're still no match for an upgraded Murderang

BELOW While the combo multiplier resets quickly, the Style meter is slow to deplete, allowing you to make the most of your Amps even when both feet hit terra firma



ABOVE Completing most tasks unlocks new clothes, which you can buy from a vendor who pops up around the city. Refreshingly, you can switch gender, too. Whether you're male or female, you'll be treated no differently



the desire to use it. The frantic nature of combat and the unyielding pace – left-trigger aiming is supposed to slow things down, though it barely makes a difference – means you'll feel like you're winging it, but that's all part of the fun. Maintaining a semblance of control as you're hurtling along carries the same kinetic thrill as a high-speed run on *Tony Hawk* or *SSX*.

On your travels, you'll find several-dozen score-based challenges scattered about the world, too, exclusively focused on traversal and killing enemies. Though often straightforward and one-note, some have neat contextual twists. One such type is an objective-based challenge that invites you to kill mutants in specific ways before luring a group onto an electrified track so an incoming train can splatter them. Elsewhere, unlocking more powerful Amps requires you to defend vats of Overcharge from increasingly voluminous waves of mutants. The wooden barricades that surround the OD's targets will only hold up so long, so you have a limited supply of points to spend on traps to place. Some have whirling blades, others freeze enemies in the immediate vicinity, spraying icy blasts across a wider radius when you bounce upon them.

With all of its core ideas exhaustively detailed, the game is finally free to try new things. There's an inventive ascent that sees you firing harpoons between two skyscrapers while under attack, and a sequence where you're invited to set off car alarms in order to attract mutants so that they might fight the currently entrenched scavengers. Boss fights haven't always been an Insomniac strength, but the examples here are splendid: there's an on-rails battle against a giant blimp in the form of Fizzco's mascot, which feels like a surreal remix of *Super Mario Sunshine*'s Mecha Bowser face-off, while another set-piece sees you attempting to keep up with a dragon as it snakes through the city. It might still have a weak point that requires three direct hits to bring the beast down, but it's refreshing to face an enemy where you're not simply having to dodge predictable attack patterns before clamping your trigger finger over the fire button.



SUGAR THRILL GANG

Multiplayer mode Chaos Squad is accessed from any phone booth in Sunset City. Here, you and up to seven others engage in a series of collaborative and competitive challenges, voting between two options each time: you might assault a scavenger fort as a team, or jostle for supply drops to transport to a nearby boat. Completing bonus objectives boosts your combined score, and contributes to a more substantial buff for the concluding night defence sequence, in which it's all but impossible to maintain composure amid the tumult. With a full complement, that's eight times the explosives, fireworks and corrosive goop of the already hectic campaign. But it's an entertaining mess, and a useful one: anything you earn or unlock can be taken back and used in singleplayer.

ABOVE From high ground, you can lure groups to take them down quickly. Try using the Captain Ahab harpoon to spear an OD, releasing a pool of Overcharge that attracts mutants, then dropping a TNTeddy into the crowd

And if the scattergun humour misses as often as it hits – typically, the harder it strains for the zeitgeist, the wider it is of the mark – the game's irreverent treatment of death alleviates any frustration at repeated failures. After a short loading time, you'll respawn in one of a number of different ways, emerging from a clay mould or a sarcophagus, or even climbing out of a TV like Sadako from Ring. The downside to this is that there's little sense of peril when you've got so little to lose; indeed, with generous checkpointing that means you'll emerge having lost seconds rather than minutes of progress, it's often easier to just let yourself die when you're low on health rather than struggle on with a flashing red distraction in the top left of the screen.

Such obvious eagerness to please is laudable in some respects, but the insistent fervour with which Insomniac bombards the player – with colours, with ideas, with pickups and powerups and buffs and bonuses – means *Sunset Overdrive* is best approached as you would any caffeinated energy drink. In small gulps, it offers an exhilarating sugar rush, but too much will leave you with a headache. As such, it's best consumed in moderation.

7

Post Script

Sunset Overdrive's clash of punk spirit and corporate culture

Anarchic, irreverent, edgy: Microsoft's marketing would have you believe *Sunset Overdrive* is all of these things. But it's more middle-age crisis than teenage rebellion, its brand of corporate-approved chaos misappropriating the concept of punk. It's an executive wearing a Ramones T-shirt beneath a suit jacket, inserting 'rad' in a PowerPoint slide, and livening up conferences by booking the bands of his youth.

As a musical genre, punk was defined as much by its attitude as its sound. It was about flicking two fingers at the establishment, not giving a second thought as to how others perceived it. Punk rock was played by performers who considered their lack of virtuosity a virtue. So to see it appropriated by a game made with an extravagant budget and by a developer with no little expertise is bizarre, not least because it's so pleadingly keen for you to love it. It cares far too much.

That's reflected in so many aspects of the game, not least its desperation to look the part. A good portion of its selection of haircuts, clothing and tattoos seems to have been sourced from a Google image search for 'punk', and as such there's something slightly too calculated about its wardrobe, its colours and distressed patterns too artfully designed. It's a Guardian fashion editor's idea of dressing down, while the stranger options – a wolf's head, a LARPer's helmet – have better, sillier equivalents in the *Saints Row* games.

Nor is punk about adenoidal mumblings and the occasional yelp over chugging three-chord guitar rhythms. *Overdrive*'s soundtrack features a number of bands – The Melvins, The Bronx – who would self-identify as punk and yet, with a handful of exceptions, it's painfully one-note. If the action does its best to raise your pulse, the music seems to be endeavouring to return your heartbeat to its resting rate.

To paraphrase Joey Ramone, punk is about being an individual and going against the grain. You can't be anti-establishment when your ideas don't break the status quo, but perpetuate it. Here is a game that suffers every bit as badly from the bloat that has afflicted its contemporaries, that fills its world with content and expects everyone to be impressed by its volume. It's structured almost identically to its peers, scattering collectibles and optional challenges throughout its world, and featuring the levelling systems and endless upgrades that have become de rigueur in recent years.

Its humour is a little too targeted as well. Its barrage of pop-culture nods and self-referential winks are mostly riffs on ideas we've seen on dozens of occasions before, and those that aren't – a cutscene that borrows brazenly from Cabin In The Woods, and mentions of Reddit, GameFAQs and NeoGAF – again feel like they stem from its makers' keenness to demonstrate that they share plenty in common with their audience.

There's certainly something amusing about a game that purports to be punk featuring a filter for bad language



Elsewhere, attempts to break the fourth wall, and to poke fun at videogame conventions, fall into a common trap. One early moment sees our protagonist wondering aloud whether a nearby NPC is relevant, because there's no icon above his head. It's a sharp little dig at a staple of the open-world genre, but it's instantly undermined by Insomniac slavishly adhering to it. It makes for a fine analogy for the game as a whole, something that hints at a desire to be different but then fails almost entirely to follow it through. And no prizes for guessing what follows a complaint about laborious fetchquests.

The excessive swearing, meanwhile, feels like hollow bluster, bringing to mind Bill Grundy goading Steve Jones to "say something outrageous" on live television. There's certainly something amusing about a game that purports to be punk featuring filters for gore and bad language, presumably tailored towards anyone playing with children present (though, in fact, the frequent bleeps make the script's potty mouth all the more noticeable, and funnier).

Yet that in itself is strangely subversive, an uncommonly considerate addition in a genre that traditionally celebrates violence and vulgarity. And it's not the only disruptive element. *Sunset Overdrive* is remarkably frank about its plot contrivances being nothing more than flimsy excuses to send you back out into the world to grind and bounce and shoot some mutants. Its nonplayable interruptions cut to the chase, rather than wasting time with shallow character development as many of its peers would.

And its tone is decidedly unorthodox: most open-world games are power fantasies, but this is a cartoon that embraces its inherent silliness. There's something delightfully old-fashioned about being rewarded with thick wads of greenbacks when you rescue a survivor, and likewise the way they're automatically absorbed without your having to press a button, or even pass over them. The game blithely refuses to make excuses for its abundance of grindable edges, nor explain why rails and abandoned vehicles are arranged into racing lines. There are no cutscenes that tell you why you can suddenly dash in midair, or bounce higher than before. You simply can, and so you do. That's weirdly revelatory.

Moreover, in forcing its players to embrace its unconventional methods of getting around, *Sunset Overdrive* finds a crucial point of distinction. Actively incentivising fluid movement and punishing attempts to muddle through feels like a quiet kind of rebellion against what we've come to expect from the open-world genre, where absolute freedom is king. Maybe there's a little bit of punk in Insomniac's latest after all. ■

LittleBigPlanet 3

LittleBigPlanet 3 is stuffed with so many ideas that its new custodian, Sumo Digital, has seen fit to abandon almost all of Media Molecule's tricks and tools for its singleplayer campaign. But while the likes of Grabinators or the Creatinator are absent in this deliriously imaginative adventure, you won't miss them. *LBP3* may not be a long tale, but it's a generous one.

You might occasionally miss the tones of incumbent narrator Stephen Fry, however, because the game's expanded cast leaves less room for his soothingly well-bred intonation. The most exciting addition is Hugh Laurie, who plays *LittleBigPlanet 3*'s well-meaning, buffoonish antagonist, Newton. Among other notable names, Nolan North, Peter Serafinowicz and Tara Strong (whose take on a spoilt queen, in combination with the contributions of Fry and Laurie, evokes the spirit of Black Adder at times) all feature, voicing the various Creators you meet along the way.

And there are other new faces in the form of three playable heroes called Oddsock, Toggle and Swoop, two of which are excellent additions. Oddsock bounds about on all fours at speed and is capable of running up walls, wall-jumping and leaping farther than Sackboy. Toggle, meanwhile, can flick between large and small versions of himself at will, becoming heavy and slow or light and fast in the process. This simple dynamic is put to great use in some inspired level design as you flick between the two forms to tumble through the game's soft-furnished obstacle courses. The latter of the trio, however, is less accomplished. While he introduces unfettered flight and his eponymous move to the series, he's prosaic and unsatisfying to control.

Sackboy himself hasn't been eclipsed by the fresh platforming possibilities introduced by his new friends, either, and critics of the earlier games' approach to physics will appreciate the tweaks in Sumo's approach. He might be limited to a comparatively basic moveset, but he has a range of new tools that both augment his movement and allow him to interact with the world in unexpected ways. Chief among these is the Hook Hat, which allows you to grab onto and ride sweeping 'bendy' rails like a woolly Booker DeWitt. The Blink Ball, meanwhile, is a headset that fires dual-purpose orbs, useful both as a way of killing enemies and capable of teleporting you to specially marked areas. And the Boost Boots do much as you'd expect, enabling you to double jump to previously out-of-reach areas.

You can select these tools – plus the Pumpinator (a hat capable of blowing and sucking air), and a secret-revealing torch called the Illuminator – from the new Sackpocket, accessed by tapping Circle, which allows you to carry multiple devices at once, rather than relying on pick-up plinths. The ability to carry more than one tool has allowed Sumo to engineer puzzles of greater complexity, but the studio only touches on the possibilities during the campaign – it's down to creative players to explore such things more fully.

Publisher SCE
Developer Sumo Digital
Format PS3, PS4
Release November 18 (US), November 26 (EU), November 28 (UK)

The new Hook Hat allows you to grab on to and ride sweeping 'bendy' rails like a woolly Booker DeWitt



In fact, you don't even have to stick to Sumo's toolset, since the new Power-Up Creator allows you to build your own devices out of any objects you choose and, in combination with *LBP3*'s improved logic gates, define their properties. And if you're feeling nostalgic, you'll find all of Sackboy's previous equipment in the editor – the game is compatible with millions of levels created for the first two games, after all. Playable characters, meanwhile, can also be extensively tweaked. Dissatisfied with the distance you cover with Oddsock's leap? Then add the ability to fly for his appearance in your level. It's all part of Sumo's effort to respond to the needs of the creators in *LBP*'s community, adding 70 brand-new tools and enhancing 39 returning gadgets in a toolbox that now sports 250 pieces.

But even these profound improvements are eclipsed by Sumo's expansion of the game's playable layers, which rise from three to an initially dizzying 16. Ambitious creators found ways to glitch in additional layers in previous games, achieving the illusion of greater depth, but being granted so much extra room exponentially increases builders' options. Meanwhile, the addition of items such as slides, bounce pads, the aforementioned bendy rails, and Veliciporters (which spit you out at the same velocity as you enter them) make moving Sackboy between separated layers easy.

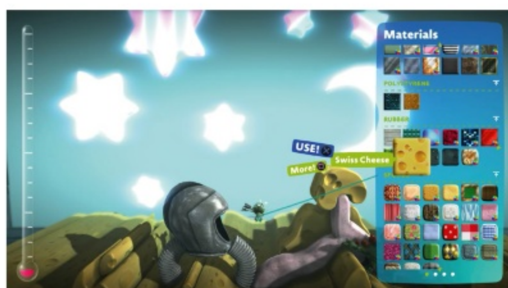
Seasoned builders may worry that the added structural complexity introduced by 13 additional layers will mean that the Create mode's thermometer, which tells you how busy your constructions are and prevents any more building once full, would max out quickly. But two tools – a dynamic thermometer and the Dephysicaliser – bring the editor closer to professional game-making tools than ever. Switching on the dynamic thermometer means the game only renders geometry within a definable range of the player, streaming the rest as you approach it. Meanwhile, the Dephysicaliser quickly switches off collision detection on foreground, background or otherwise unreachable objects to further reduce the load on your PlayStation's memory.

LBP3 hasn't suffered from the move to a new home, then, and Sumo evidently understands *LBP*'s community every bit as well as Media Molecule does. Yes, there are some small slip-ups along the way: our review build occasionally suffered from long loading times, and opening the Popit menu – an essential and regular task – was rarely instantaneous. Even so, as a platformer, the third numbered game in the series certainly represents Sackboy's best, and funniest, adventure yet. But as an accessible, powerful game-building tool, *LittleBigPlanet 3* is remarkable, and offers more scope than we dared to expect.

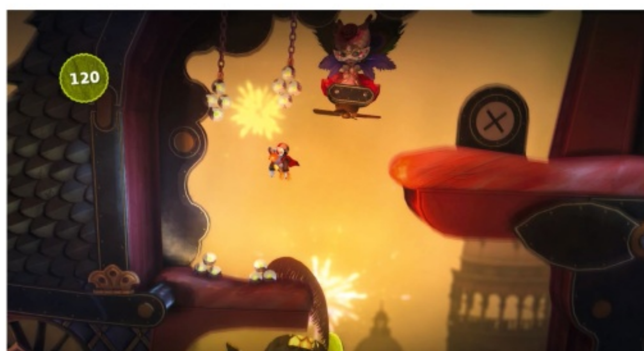
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LEFT Gravity can now be turned off, or inverted, as demonstrated in this level, which you'll spend flipping from ceiling to floor as you make your way up a tower. BELOW Holding R1 makes Swoop do exactly that, diving at speed and allowing you to negotiate timed sections of levels. Tap or hold X, meanwhile, to flap your wings

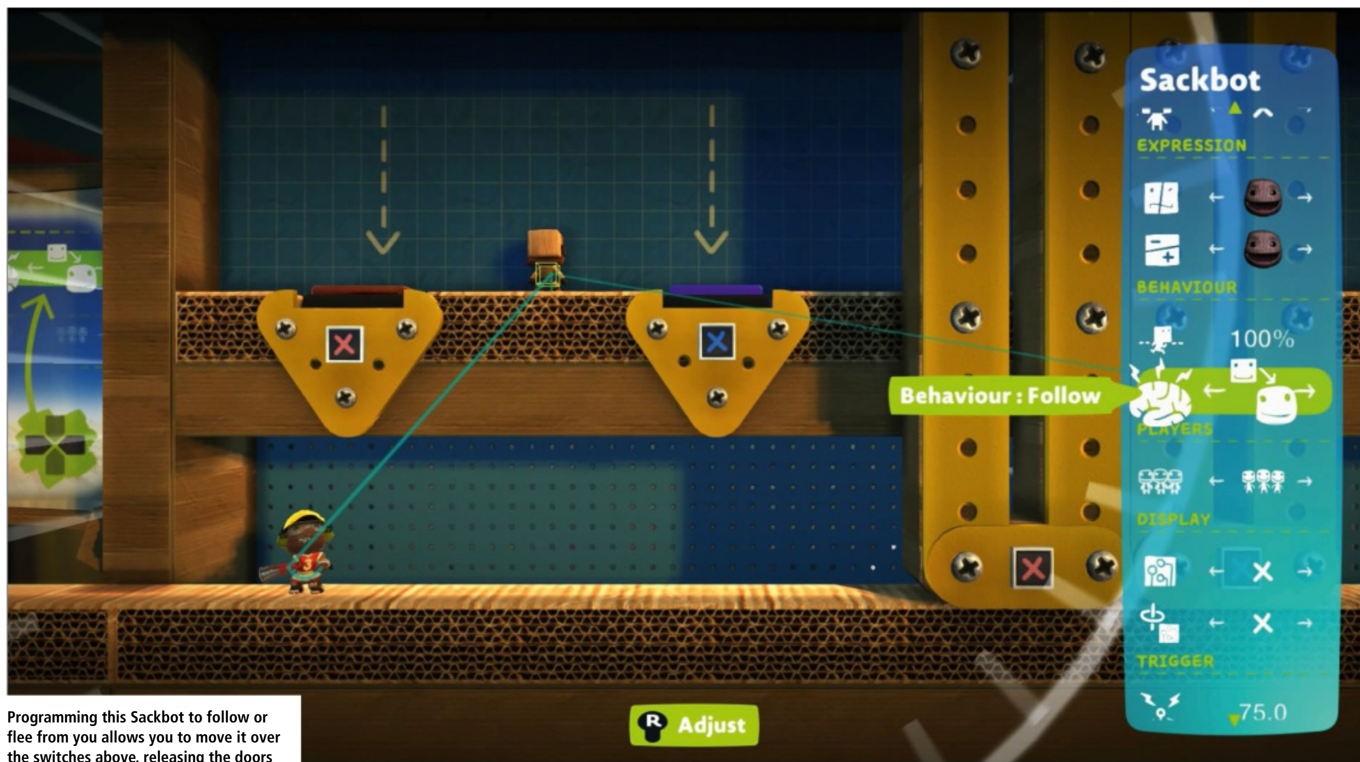


ABOVE Your Popit menu will rapidly fill with items, which occasionally makes things difficult to find – especially when the cracker texture sits in the 'polystyrene' group and the cheese one is found under 'rubber'





LittleBigPlanet 3 manages to repeat its celebrated ancestors' achievement of steering clear of tired old traditional platforming environments in favour of more surreal, more creative settings ▶



Programming this Sackbot to follow or flee from you allows you to move it over the switches above, releasing the doors

Post Script

Sumo's first full LittleBigPlanet is the series' friendliest addition yet

Even Steven Fry's comforting voice couldn't quite take the edge off the daunting task of getting to grips with the original *LittleBigPlanet*'s editing tools. While comparatively simple next to later instalments, Media Molecule's game was unlike anything before it, and the tools it handed players set a new standard for console level editors. The game provided a wealth of narrated video tutorials, and softened the fall with the intuitively designed Popit menu, but it was still insufficient to stave off a crippling case of blank-canvas syndrome for many.

With *LittleBigPlanet 2*, Media Molecule gifted its community with an even deeper, more complex suite of tools capable of making entire games, not just levels. Simplified logic gates and programmable Sackbots made life easier for all those who had once hashed together ad-hoc cutscenes and machines from a befuddling array of switches and sensors, while a music sequencer allowed keen composers to soundtrack their creations, for better or worse. But while the game's tools evolved, its way of teaching you didn't.

LittleBigPlanet 3 approaches the problem differently. There are still plenty of tutorial videos, but Sumo has better integrated *LBP*'s two halves by introducing creation elements to the story mode. Previous entries might have allowed you to vandalise story levels with stickers and decorations, but *LBP3*'s Contraption Challenges go much further by requiring that you build a vehicle in order to take part in the event at hand. Your options are limited to only a few select parts, and the vehicles themselves are built on ready-made chassis, but the sense of achievement when you, for example, leap 100m farther after tweaking the design of your long-jump buggy is a real rush. And, like disguising vegetables in a child's meal, such tasks get players comfortable with the basics of the creation tools without them even noticing.

Anyone bitten by the bug can head to the Popit Academy. Taking place over two terms, each with a handful of levels dedicated to a specific tool or family of contraptions, these stages provide a deeper understanding of *LBP3*'s most essential gadgets while couching the whole process in a series of increasingly challenging puzzles. Two of *LBP2*'s Creators return as guides, with not even a whisper from Fry, and cover a wide range of techniques from the basics of using pistons and string to more in-depth tasks, such as wiring switches to teleporters or adjusting the properties of materials to make them more slippery.

Although we longed for another term or two, the Popit Academy is a great on-ramp for *LBP*'s Create mode, providing players with the knowledge – and confidence – to get started immediately after they graduate. Sumo adds yet more padding to each newcomer's landing by asking whether players would like access to the editor's advanced controls from the off, or to stick with a pared-down selection while they get settled in. Whichever you choose, additions such as the dynamic thermometer make it easier to create without worrying about limitations or optimising geometry – that's something you can obsess over later on.

Given the dizzying capabilities of its editor, and the groundbreaking nature of the first game, Media Molecule did an excellent job of condensing that power into the easily understandable Popit menu. And by keeping Sackboy onscreen, the studio ensured that making levels always felt a lot more like play than either coding or sculpting. But Sumo has built on those confident foundations in ways that feel so natural it's hard to believe they weren't here from the beginning. Switching studios partway through a series can often be detrimental, but *LBP3* feels like an entirely natural addition. And it seems fitting that the injection of fresh blood on the development side looks set to open up the series to a whole generation of players who might otherwise have been put off. ■

Call Of Duty: Advanced Warfare

Call Of Duty never felt like it was lacking a loot system. You won't notice an opponent's hot-pink gauntlets in the second and a half between laying eyes on each other and one of you dying, after all, and you can't give out powerful weaponry through random drops in a game whose players obsess over balance. So it proves: all 350 of *Advanced Warfare*'s custom guns are variations on the base weaponset, trading off a small increase in rate of fire, for instance, for a reduction in damage. Single-use items might boost XP gain for the next match, or drop a Scorestreak reward a few minutes in, but there is none of the tangible sense of progression that the best loot games offer. It's all a bit dull.

Happily, there are plenty of thrills to be found elsewhere. Sledgehammer may have run support on previous *COD*s, but this is its first crack at the many little problems to which Treyarch and Infinity Ward put forward solutions biannually. For the multiplayer's intimidating learning curve, it offers the Combat Readiness Program, which removes killcams, doles out Scorestreak rewards for free, and replaces the match scoreboard with a tally of your kills, but not deaths. It's not for us, admittedly, but it's clearly a more effective on-ramp to competitive play. The loot system addresses the opposite problem, encouraging those who only play multiplayer into other modes for exclusive drops.

Yet *COD*'s multiplayer formula is too successful to need much tinkering. The bigger challenge for Sledgehammer was surely how to make a singleplayer campaign that adheres to the series' template without being too obvious about it. *Advanced Warfare*'s is, like its predecessors, a blend of follow missions, shootouts, setpieces and vehicle escapes. It hits all the right beats in the right order, and as such should be boring. Instead, this is the best singleplayer *COD*'s been in years.

Forty years in the future, a private military company, Atlas, has amassed an arsenal of remarkable technical complexity and superiority. CEO Jonathan Irons, played by Kevin Spacey, is a head of state's first port of call when things get sticky. The opening mission puts this into stark relief as you strut through trenches beneath a passing walking tank; take cover from a swarm of drones, then let off an EMP to take them down; and use your Exo suit's jetpack-like booster to dodge, double jump, cross large gaps and break long falls. Throw a grenade and it hangs in the air at the peak of its arc before homing in on a group of enemies. This is clearly still *Call Of Duty*, yet things are delightfully different.

Then it very nearly goes horribly wrong. The start of the second mission follows the well-thumbed *COD* design document to the letter, with a dreary midnight rescue mission that culminates in a slow-motion breach-and-clear section. Then the tech in your left arm goes on the fritz, the lights come up, and you realise you've been had. It's a simulation. After a tour

Publisher Activision
Developer Sledgehammer Games
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One (version tested)
Release Out now

You not only need to worry about what's around the next corner, but what might be about to jump over the wall



of the sprawling Atlas campus, you run the mission again, this time with your new toys. It is a pleasure.

It's a fine metaphor for the hours to follow, too. *COD* staples play out in new ways, the annual sneaking level replacing the ghillie suit with a cloaking device, then introducing a scanner that can see through it. You escape trouble across a downtown river in a craft that can avoid otherwise fatal collisions with other boats by diving below the surface. Sledgehammer has ideas of its own, too. A grappling hook powers a freeform base infiltration that feels more like an *Arkham* game than a *COD* one, and the studio nods to its past, too, with one tense, delicately paced section a callback to *Dead Space*.

Tech can't fix everything, however. The story is stock-in-trade *COD* fare, and even more predictable than usual, though Sledgehammer at least has the decency to get the non-twist out of the way early. It's disappointing, too, that after setting up its antagonist as the enemy within – a refreshing change after so many years of Islamic and communist threats – the studio has Irons go to ground late on in New Baghdad. And for all that the new gadgets enthrall, there are simply too many of them. Sledgehammer decides what you take into each mission, and you'll fall in love with something only to have it promptly taken away.

Many gizmos are constants in multiplayer, but have been toned down to ensure balance. Cloaked enemies are still easy to spot, say, while deployable tech only lasts seconds. The double jump is unchanged, though, and has a huge effect, helping you escape danger or quickly reach high ground. There's a greater emphasis on vertical space, and it takes some getting used to; you not only need to worry about what's around the next corner, but what might be about to jump over the wall.

Multiplayer spans the usual assortment of modes, most of which will be ignored as the playerbase sticks to its annual comfort zones. Yet it is a newcomer, Uplink, that best reflects Sledgehammer's approach to old *COD* problems. Two teams seek to gain control of a satellite dropped into the middle of a map and guide it through a goal at the enemy spawn point. You can pass it to a teammate, throw it, or simply run with it, hurling yourself at the glimmering portal while your opponents try to trace the arc of your double jump with their guns. It is a game of constant, quiet heroism – the unseen airborne shotgun blast to prevent a goal, the silent charge for the match-winning points – and when the round ends, winners and losers alike will be laughing. *COD*'s been silly for years, really, but it's never been made by a studio so prepared to celebrate it. The result is a much-needed mechanical shot in the arm for the most rigidly defined series on the market. *Advanced Warfare* is still *Call Of Duty*, but it's more playful, knowing and refreshing than *COD*'s been in years.

8



ABOVE The campaign is standard continent-hopping fare, albeit with a few twists. A revitalised, Dubai-style New Baghdad is a highlight, as are a Greek fishing town and this fraught polar expedition to retrieve a bioweapon







TOP This is the first *COD* to feature rendered cutscenes, and it's a move that pays off. In addition to Spacey, there's a loving treatment of the protagonist, played by Troy Baker. **MAIN** For all the desire to tinker with convention, it wouldn't be a modern *COD* if the screen wasn't frequently splattered with jam. **LEFT** The big concern with the game's multiplayer is the potential for exploits afforded by the improved traversal and new tech, and how quickly Sledgehammer is able to respond through patches

The Evil Within

You can tell a lot about *The Evil Within* from its protagonist's melee attack. Detective Sebastian Castellanos may not have the build of a Chris Redfield or Leon S Kennedy, but he puts plenty of force into each punch, winding back before unleashing a mighty haymaker. It's deliberately ungainly, designed to leave you vulnerable for a vital second, its momentum carrying you slightly, potentially crucially, forwards. At the same time, it carries a satisfying weight, and it's certainly an efficient way to break crates or obstructive padlocks. Yet take aim at any of the humanoid horrors you'll face in this 15- to 20-hour nightmare, and you'll deliver little more than a glancing blow. Forget Leon S Kennedy's skull-crushing suplexes: you're not going to be playing this like *Resident Evil 4*.

Still, comparisons with director Shinji Mikami's opus are inevitable, and they're not always wide of the mark. As early as the third chapter you're asked to negotiate a village populated by lumbering, disfigured enemies who overwhelm you through sheer numbers and aggression rather than intelligence; later, you'll trigger the arrival of a chainsaw-wielding nightmare who will soak up most of your ammunition before collapsing. Suicidal foes will rush you clutching sticks of dynamite; other threats wear protective masks to discourage headshots. Even blowing a chunk out of an enemy's skull isn't guaranteed to halt their advance.

Yet with supplies so scarce, at times *The Evil Within*'s closest relative is the GameCube remake of *Resident Evil,* in part because you're encouraged to burn corpses lest they rise again here too. It's preposterous that Castellanos is initially capable of carrying only five matches, but this limit plays a central role in the game's careful resource management, and is an additional tactical consideration during its encounters. As, too, are the rudimentary traps found on floors and walls. Dismantle them and you'll earn parts with which to craft bolts for the Agony Crossbow, or you might opt to leave them in place, luring groups of enemies towards an explosive surprise to avoid wasting valuable rounds.

That's assuming, of course, that in the nerve-fraying tension of a panicked retreat you can avoid blundering into danger. Flight can often seem a more valid option than a fight, but with with the unfit detective able to run for only three seconds (before upgrades), you'll need to time your sprints to perfection. A more stealthy approach is often recommended, but Castellanos moves so slowly when crouched that an attempted silent kill from behind can, as often as not, result in being spotted just as you're reaching for your knife. Every tactic is high-risk, and mistakes are punished cruelly.

Indeed, Mikami pushes against contemporary design boundaries to a degree that will rankle with some. The 2:35:1 aspect ratio may have been born partly of technical limits, but it suits the claustrophobic design,

Publisher Bethesda Softworks
Developer Tango Gameworks
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4 (version tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

After a clumsy opening, The Evil Within hits its stride towards the end of the first act and the tension rarely lets up



purposely disempowering you by reducing your field of vision. The camera sticks very close to Castellanos's back, while aiming removes him almost entirely from view, his extended arm and current weapon all you'll see as the focus shifts onto whatever he's aiming at. Such a tight, narrow view induces a sense of genuine discomfort, heightened when you're swarmed by several enemies and can only really point your weapon at one. *Resident Evil 4* forced you to plant your feet before firing. Tellingly, you'll spend a lot of your time in *The Evil Within* edging nervously backwards.

Meanwhile, its macabre story, sparked by a brutal mass murder at a psychiatric hospital, contrives to force Castellanos through a variety of environments, occasionally even transforming a single space into something entirely different. It's both exciting and disorienting in equal measure, and while as a result the plot lacks a propulsive narrative drive, you're never quite sure what to expect next. The game finds a sweet spot between anticipation and trepidation, the desire to find out what's going on just barely overcoming your natural reluctance to face fresh horrors. Even the save rooms rarely feel like a safe haven, the strains of Debussy's Clair De Lune welcoming you to a decaying ward that feels more like a prison, or even a torture chamber. Here, Castellanos spends green gel he's collected from glass jars and defeated enemies on arsenal and ability upgrades, each one delivered by a sharp jolt to the brain and accompanied by a shriek that echoes unsettlingly around the peeling walls.

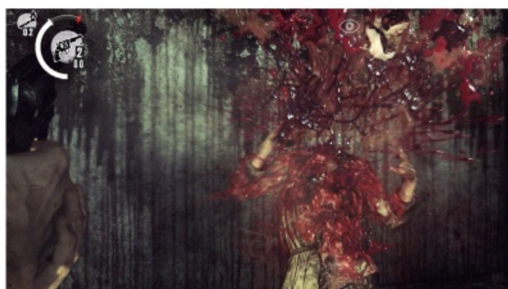
After a clumsy opening, *The Evil Within* hits its stride towards the end of the first act and the tension rarely lets up. A fierce siege with an AI partner and a long trek through a mansion with rudimentary puzzles punctuated sporadically by an indestructible enemy suggest Mikami is occasionally happy to coast along on past glories, though a combination of some startling creature design and Masafumi Takada's menacing score do enough to compensate for moments of familiarity. And in the terrifying Laura, a scuttling spider-woman with a bloodcurdling scream, Tango trumps Lisa Trevor, particularly during one masterfully orchestrated shiver as Castellanos glimpses her silhouette climbing past a window at the far end of a dark corridor.

A grimy aesthetic that draws from '80s video nasties and contemporary splatter cinema means *The Evil Within* can be a gruelling, enervating journey in places, not least when the director's playfully malicious streak occasionally tilts over into outright spitefulness. But between the one-hit kills, the poor signposting, the enforced stealth sections and the many death traps, this is an intelligently crafted chiller, and superior to anything Capcom has given us in the genre since Mikami's departure.

7



Headshots will crack away the protection of masked enemies, but you'll waste a few valuable rounds that way. Far better to shoot them in the leg and burn them while they're on the ground



ABOVE It's a Mikami game, which means another entry in the annals of great videogame shotguns. A close-range blast usually results in a cathartic eruption of gore and a moment of respite from the encroaching hordes





ABOVE There are some arrestingly surreal sights, particularly in the later stages. The plot can seem scattershot at times, but it makes for a thrillingly unpredictable ride. LEFT This is a game more reliant on atmosphere than traditional scare tactics. Which isn't to say Mikami is above the odd jump scare, of course, but the game's few jolts are well spaced and cannily done

Lords Of The Fallen

Despite our best efforts, we keep cycling through our magic powers when we mean to roll beneath an enemy's sweeping blade. It's an easy mistake to make in a game that so closely apes its inspiration – *Lords Of The Fallen*'s normal and heavy attacks are mapped to the same shoulder buttons as their *Dark Souls* counterparts, after all, and the same is true of its guard and two-handed weapon stance. But while FromSoftware bound an evasive tumble to Circle on PS3, *Lords* uses X. It's a small anomaly in an otherwise familiar control scheme (albeit one that means we quaff our replenishable health potions at an alarming rate early on), but characterises the disquieting sense of skewed déjà vu that CI and Deck13's work evokes.

That's not to say *Lords* doesn't have any ideas of its own. In fact, the game is full of additions to the formula it borrows from so heavily. Among the best of these is an experience multiplier that ramps up with every kill (up to a maximum of x2). It encourages you to hold on to the points you've already gained, since depositing your current experience in exchange for attribute or spell points resets the multiplier. Faced with a new area, the decision of whether to play it safe and level up or to risk losing your entire haul in combat against stronger enemies in the name of greed is a genuinely tough one.

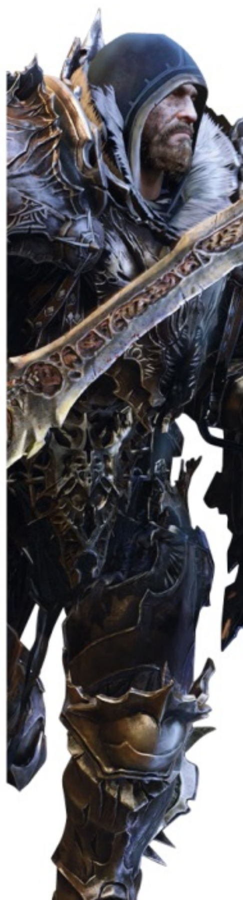
To aid your survival, you can top up your health bar and potions at checkpoints – the equivalent of resting at a bonfire – but doing so doesn't regenerate fallen enemies. Only dying or leaving an area and returning to it will bring them back. But if avarice, or even hubris, results in an untimely death farther down the line, you'll have one chance to recover your lost experience by fighting your way back to your ghost, a glowing light that waits at the point of your demise. Unlike in *Dark Souls*, you only have a finite amount of time to reach it, defined by the length of your previous killstreak, before it disappears, a mechanic gleefully designed to pressure you into making bad decisions. In practice, you usually have plenty of time, and once you do arrive at your ghost it might be beneficial to leave it uncollected for yet a little longer, since standing in its vicinity confers a stats buff that might give you the edge in the face of apparently overwhelming odds.

All of this is bound up in a combat system that, while ponderous by conventional action-RPG standards, feels sprightly in comparison to *Dark Souls*' weighty, nerve-racking encounters. Heavier weapons and armour slow you down, of course, but even as a lumbering tank protagonist Harkyn's moveset will feel fluid to *Souls* veterans as he strings normal and heavy attacks into satisfying combos. The invincibility window during rolls is generous, too (assuming you hit the right button).

Harkyn has more brutish options as well, including parry and kick moves. And while many enemies carry large shields that make head-on attacks ineffective,

Publisher Square Enix
Developer CI Games, Deck13 Interactive
Format PC, PS4 (version tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

There's no sense that you're fighting something intelligent or cunning, just awkwardly resilient



Harkyn can stagger opponents by sprinting into them with his own shield raised. It's a technique that works on many foes, even hulking ones, proving essential when dealing with both fast-moving, simian-esque sword fighters and mindless zombie-like creatures that pay little heed to cautious circling.

Unfortunately, the developers undo this good work during the game's numerous boss encounters. Rather than build on the dynamic combat found elsewhere, *Lords*' boss design favours simple, repetitive attack patterns and predictable windows of opportunity. And in a stultifying misunderstanding of what makes *Dark Souls*' boss fights special, it furnishes its gatekeepers with towering, demoralising health bars. Beating most of them is a case of going through the motions, staying out of reach during each creature's offensive routine, and then chipping off a little vitality before backing off – there's no sense that you're fighting something intelligent or cunning, just awkwardly resilient.

There are other poorly implemented borrowed ideas, not least the world itself. Labyrinthine in nature, and interconnected by gradually discovered shortcuts, many areas feel too samey to be mentally mapped. As a result, navigation is a confusing, patience-sapping endeavour. It doesn't help that *Lords*' signposting is terrible, with progress-essential information buried in the game's poor cutscenes and not repeated elsewhere. We found ourselves trapped in an NPC-strewn castle for some time after missing the news that we could now open magically sealed doors. Returning to the person who originally divulged that information elicited no reminder, and objective text offered no hints either.

More damningly, we spent our imprisonment wondering whether our inability to progress was a bug, such was the frequency of glitches we encountered elsewhere. Enemies often become trapped in scenery (one somehow managing to get his torso embedded in the ceiling of a tunnel, leaving only his feet for us to hack away at); our targeting reticule would sometimes fail to recognise enemies entirely, especially disastrous when facing fast-moving, powerful aggressors; and a checkpoint failed to activate during a tough sequence.

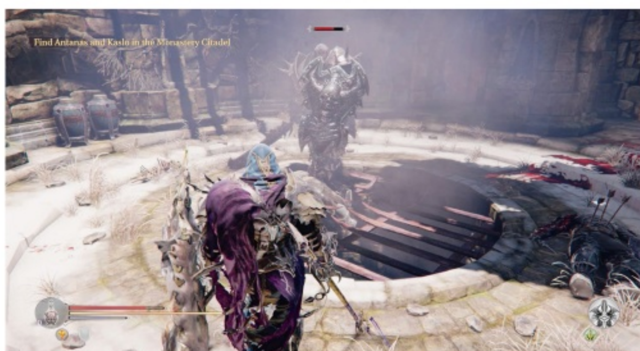
Then there's the framerate, which flails back and forth before plummeting in juddering protest when the game attempts to hit its highest gears. It's a pity, given some of the artistry evident in the game world, and it's indicative of an ambitious team reaching beyond its capabilities, a problem that manifests itself in both technical and design issues. This is a game that tries to build on FromSoftware's formidable work but comes off feeling characterless and lacking in finesse. There's still much enjoyment to be found in the interim grinding between boss fights, but *Lords Of The Fallen*'s greatest sin is that all feels rather soulless.

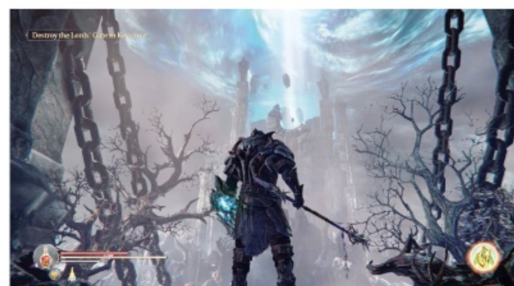
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RIGHT Most boss encounters are made more difficult by each lord's ability to summon other enemies. The three-legged Infiltrator forgoes this option in favour of covering the ground in thorny vines that hold you in place if stepped on. **MAIN** A good kick should send this fellow over the edge, but fighting indoors can be as much a battle with the game's camera as it is with the enemy you're facing. **BOTTOM** The enemies and armour on show are designed with care, and characters bear beefy gaits that lend weight to each violent clash. The aesthetic reminds us a little of Chair's *Infinity Blade* series







ABOVE *Lords*' world has been invaded by an undead force called the Rhogar, whose own world must be travelled to on several occasions. Despite the scale of individual scenes, the geography is compact

Sid Meier's Civilization: Beyond Earth

Since the dawn of *Civilization*, the goal has been to leave the world's problems behind and embark on a new chapter for humanity in outer space. That's where *Beyond Earth* begins, but it soon becomes clear that escaping our planet is far easier than getting out of the shadow of *Alpha Centauri*. Not the star system, you understand, but Meier's beloved 1999 strategy game.

Beyond Earth is *Civilization V* in space rather than *Alpha Centauri 2*. While that's no crime, it does make it hard not to draw comparisons, or to feel a measure of disappointment at its paucity of ambition and how much less personality it contains than either of its ancestors. It isn't just a reskin that swaps barbarians for aliens and bans the old jokes about Gandhi getting the A-bomb, but nor does it ever really feel like a game about taking humanity to the next level. Where *Alpha Centauri* chose to use the 4X genre as a place to explore society and philosophy as much as warfare, *Beyond Earth* is content to simply be our next battleground.

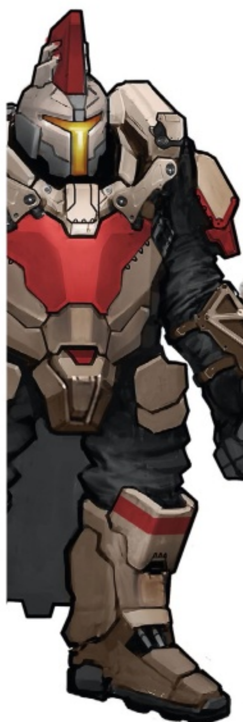
For the most part, it has to stick relatively close to familiar concepts. Battles are fought primarily with ever-shinier conventional weapons rather than outlandish future nightmares, and there's a frustrating lack of unit stacking that makes the map far fiddlier than it needs to be. The equipment looks the part, however, and it's not long before elements like an orbital layer come into play, and superweapons start to unlock. The aliens also add a novel threat – at least in the early stages after planetfall, or if you get the ability to deploy Siege Worms against enemy cities, or create a few oversized xeno monsters of your own. Leave the regular ones alone and they'll typically return the favour, or even become friendly. Clear their nests and at least they're kept contained. After a while, however, native fauna is left painfully outclassed, and most are barely even a distraction by the mid-game.

The best, most dramatic, change from *Civilization* is the Affinity system. Each faction acquires points towards a particular outlook by researching technologies and making decisions in what are somewhat charitably dubbed 'quests'. Over time, they go from being entirely uninteresting Earth-centric groups – such as the Pan-Asian Cooperative and Slavic Federation, which are only a squirt of easily ignored lore from being just a starting bonus – to devotees of either Harmony, Supremacy or Purity. Harmony factions will adapt themselves to the planet, Purity players try to beat it back and make it as much like Earth as possible, while Supremacy types use cybernetics to pull themselves into the future. They all have a space-cult flavour, but benefit from emerging fluidly from individual choices rather than simply being chosen, and increasingly affect everything from the look of cities to the nature of your troops.

This system works well, and allows for a decent amount of flexibility, especially in conjunction with what's normally a tech tree, but is now a tech web. The difference is that, while initially imposing, this map of research opportunities makes it easy to see exactly what each node unlocks and leads to, with developments split into branches, which represent an interest in the field, and leaves, which are more involved projects that master it. Engineering, for instance, unlocks Power Systems and a Defense Grid, and along with Physics is the way towards Robotics. Many of these also come with Affinity points. Under Robotics, for instance, Tactical Robotics is a Supremacy tech, while Swarm Robotics is aligned to Harmony. Individual units unlocked by these techs are then upgraded further by Affinity points to create an army that will ultimately favour one of the three sides, but you don't have to commit up front, or go exclusively down one path. That way lies the best toys, but there's still scope to dabble.

Publisher 2K Games
Developer Firaxis Games
Format PC
Release Out now

Almost never is there even the sense of having created something truly amazing instead of merely useful



The catch is that this focus on Affinities largely kills any sense of knowing the factions, each of which seem to choose their own leaning based on little more than a coin flip. Their leaders have little personality, even sharing a bland script, and never play in a way that separates, say, ARC from Brazilia or even for the most part in a way that shows off the Affinities. Nor is there a sense of their actions being driven by their philosophies and backgrounds in the way *Civ* gets for free due to its use of real people and real cultures, or that *Alpha Centauri* achieved with its ideologically driven factions. Here, they're cardboard cutouts.

Beyond Earth can't find a grip on *Civ*'s ingrained sense of wonder, either. There's a connection to everything that happens in those games, from the research projects to the simple pleasure of going from spearmen to spacemen. *Beyond Earth*'s future is, by contrast, a dull one, offering little to discover or excite. Its planets are so Earth-like that it's almost a surprise to see terrain you wouldn't find over in *Civ V*. Its idea of a victory, which can be anything from making contact with a sentient alien species to returning to Earth as a conquering force, is a still image and a paragraph of text. Likewise, where once Wonders were worth a movie or some art, here they're just blueprints and a quote. Almost never is there even the sense of having created something truly amazing instead of merely useful.

The result is a game that has no trouble inheriting *Civilization*'s classic 'one more turn' factor during an initial playthrough, but struggles for the same claim on 'just one more game' once a battle has been won – particularly given the superiority of its own spiritual cousin with the expansion packs installed. It's a solid, enjoyable strategy game while it lasts, as you'd expect from one that borrows so much from *Civ V*, but very much a sidewards step for the series rather than a bold leap forwards for its kind.

6





ABOVE The AI's deficit of character makes them tough to read and their strategies difficult to discern. At times it can feel as if they're going to war, refusing to make good deals, or even just ignoring everyone at random



TOP Despite a few green clouds and some canyons apparently full of processed cheese, *Beyond Earth*'s maps do surprisingly little to convince you that you've made a journey to a whole other world. MAIN The units and buildings are a little more futuristic, but creating and running your cities is similar enough to *Civilization V* to almost forget which game you're in. RIGHT Early on, nests of aliens are a big threat, but only a Harmony player can help them stay properly relevant to the game after a while



The Legend Of Korra

On paper, it all looked so promising: perhaps the world's best developer of action games being given the task of developing a tie-in for a well-liked anime that features a powerful female lead with a variety of fighting skills. Could Activision have found a more ideal match here than Platinum? And yet as you wearily hammer Square and Triangle while facing an endgame boss with no fewer than three health bars, you may begin to wonder how it all went so wrong.

Then again, as early as the first proper level there's evidence of a studio short of resources, labouring under a meagre budget and working towards an unreasonable deadline. The animation may be smooth, the action may be sharp and the controls may be responsive, but the environments are horribly bland, entirely bereft of detail and character. You'll face one group of masked enemies, then another, and then another, sprinting through deserted beige alleyways in between, pausing occasionally to smash up vases, crates, loot chests and even the odd car.

Before then, you'll get a fleeting taste of a fully powered-up Korra before a plot contrivance causes her to lose her ability to bend the elements to her will, a well-worn device that serves only to exacerbate the inherent repetition of the core combat. Naturally, Korra explores a variety of environments over the course of the next five hours to earn them back, though the narrative can't be bothered to create a convincing reason for the journey. She spends several levels muttering something about chi blockers, sporadically regaining her skills merely by completing objectives in combat, such as building a high combo chain, or dodging incoming attacks. The antagonist is simply referred to as "that old man" for most of the game, until he introduces himself and his master plan in a laughable exposition barrage during the final stage.

When you're not facing the same enemies in slightly larger numbers and different coloured jumpsuits, or enduring some woefully rudimentary platforming, you'll be pitted against other 'benders' – sub-bosses by another name – and colossal humanoid tanks, which take a heavy pummelling before being consigned to the great scrapyard in the sky. Each encounter is largely identical to the last, though the ante is upped as you progress – if you faced one boss in an early level, you can guarantee you'll fight two of them later on.

The game reaches its nadir during interludes in which Korra rides her polar bear dog companion, Naga. These borrow liberally – brazenly, even – from *Temple Run*. You accelerate automatically, nudging the analogue stick to make rapid left and right turns, collecting spirit energy as you leap gaps, slide under low walls, and dodge rocky obstacles. A single mistake sends you back to the most recent checkpoint, though at least these are generously placed; the only other saving grace is that the stages are mercifully short, at least until one maddening late-game vehicular boss fight.

Publisher Activision
Developer PlatinumGames
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4 (version tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

Indeed, while you'd imagine the target market for *Korra* would skew a little younger than Platinum's existing audience, it hasn't toned down the difficulty from its usual standard. Bosses have substantial health gauges (in some cases plural) that take some time to whittle down, and if their blows connect, you can expect a fair chunk of your own health to disappear. Intelligent fighting will build up your chi meter, allowing you to deliver more powerful attacks more rapidly, but combos are easily interrupted, and the timing for counters, which prompt stick-pushing and button-mashing commands, never feels quite as intuitive as it should.

You're on dangerous ground when Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z feels like an appropriate comparison

To give yourself a fighting chance, you can spend the spirit points you've accumulated on potions and an artefact that automatically revives Korra when she falls in battle. Alternatively, there are expensive talismans that raise your chi meter while halving your health, or cut your attack power in two while doubling your life, though there's nothing permanent you can equip that doesn't have some kind of side effect. Temporary buffs include a speed increase, but these are so prohibitively costly you'd do well not to rely on them. You will, however, need a little extra help on occasion, not least when the game throws two large bosses at you simultaneously and the camera can't manage to keep them both onscreen. Being hit by something you can't see is irritating, though hardly exclusive to this game; you know you're on dangerous ground when *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z* feels like an appropriate comparison.

That *Korra* avoids similar levels of ignominy is entirely down to Platinum's experience as a developer of combat systems. Though the encounters vary little, the studio's rhythms are instantly recognisable; you'll see it in the way a blow connects, the way moves flow into one another. And once you've unlocked the full extent of Korra's abilities – from the slow but forceful Earth attacks to the blisteringly quick jabs of the Fire powers – you can even afford to experiment a little. Mind you, there's no real encouragement to do so until the final boss (who sometimes erects elemental walls around him), but once you're finally empowered to let loose, it becomes a much better game.

That isn't enough to deflect attention away from the fact that this is essentially ten minutes' worth of game remixed ad nauseam at steadily escalating difficulty to pad it out to five hours. By licensed game standards, it's adequate enough. What makes *Korra* so disappointing is that its immense potential has been squandered, and the name of a developer with a previously unblemished record has been tarnished. Sure, Platinum has made flawed games before, but nothing nearly so bland or as uninspiring as this.

4



RETURN TO BENDER
Complete the game on any difficulty and you can enter the Pro-Bending League. It's pretty much dodgeball with elemental powers, your trio of benders – the Fire Ferrets – taking on a series of rivals. Each side of the court is split into three zones: deplete an opponent's energy bar and you'll push them back; take out all three and you'll advance into their territory, though their attacks will gain power the further back they go. The game is over when time runs out or you knock all three opponents off the platform. It could have been an entertaining aside, but since you're only ever in control of Korra, tactics rarely extend beyond hammering Square and occasionally squeezing L2 to counter an incoming projectile.



LEFT The game suggests you lower the difficulty if you're struggling, but doing so means starting from the beginning. Few, we imagine, will bother with the Extreme mode unlocked upon completion either. **BELOW** Elemental barriers take a long time to break. The rewards are rarely worth the effort unless you're short on spirit energy. **MAIN** Enemies will flash red before they're about to launch an attack. Squeeze the left trigger just as a blow is about to land and you'll pull off a counter, opening your opponent up for punishment



ABOVE Spirit enemies replace the bog-standard masked grunts in the final two stages of the game, but their visual quirks don't equate to them being dispatched much differently. Winged opponents are a fresh irritant, though





Fantasia: Music Evolved

Building a rhythm-action game – a genre that usually requires precise inputs – around a device like Kinect is fraught with risk, but Harmonix evidently wasn't daunted by the task. *Fantasia: Music Evolved* is a different proposition to *Dance Central*, yet benefits from its developer's expertise with the device, offering similarly generous gesture recognition and an intuitive user interface. Rather than copying an elaborate series of dance moves, here you're invited to push, swipe and trace, matching the rhythms, basslines and melodies of an eclectic soundtrack. Ostensibly, you're taking the role of conductor, though the need to keep up with fast-moving cues mean your actions more often resemble frantic semaphore.

There's a thin narrative motivation for your flailing. An irritating narrator and a cheerful assistant invite you to visit a series of realms, completing objectives to rid them of a cacophonous infection. Firstly, this involves reaching a certain score target in a song and unlocking a new remix. Each realm also holds a few sound toys, as well as environmental features that can be stirred into life by your hand. You might, for example, spin a carousel of seahorses, before composing a jazzy drum fill by tracing your palm over a bed of percussive clams.

The various musical toys are reminiscent of Toshio Iwai's *Electroplankton*, though naturally lack the immediacy of a portable plaything – not least because you'll need to sit through a long loading screen for each realm

Publisher Disney Interactive Studios
Developer Harmonix
Format 360, Xbox One (version tested)
Release Out now



LET'S DUET
A second player can join in by strolling into view and shaking player one's hand. With two, each song is a collaborative and gently competitive performance: you'll both need to contribute to composition spells, while track switching alternates, allowing each player to adjust the mix to their own tastes. Happily, you don't have to play through the entire story to unlock every track: while Party mode halts your campaign progress, you'll gain instant access to all songs and remixes.

Collect enough magic fragments and you'll unlock a composition spell, used to further personalise your performance by creating looping melodies, beats and effects that play over sections of the track. It's a setup that favours improvisation over mastery, though it's hard not to feel underwhelmed by the results. Pulling individual instruments from three unlocked mixes is a more successful idea, akin to a motion-controlled *DJ Hero* with a little more creative control. Subverting classical compositions with modern instrumentation is entertaining, and the likes of Mussorgsky and Liszt are as welcome on the tracklist as The Flaming Lips and Bowie. Stirring alt-rock ingredients into Vivaldi's Four Seasons works alarmingly well, though we think it's going to be a long, long time before we drop dubstep beats into Elton John's Rocket Man again.

A structure that requires you to play each song three times to unlock its full remix potential is problematic, but inevitably Kinect is the game's greatest strength and most fundamental weakness. Harmonix has lowered the challenge to compensate for potential frustration at missed gestures, but as a result it's far too easy to get a five-star rating on your first attempt, while the knowledge that Kinect's whims are likely to prevent a perfect score discourages replays. *Fantasia* is a novel twist on the music game, then, but one lacking the sprinkling of Disney magic its title promises.

6



The Sailor's Dream

Let go. In Simogo's sixth game, this short instruction isn't merely asking you to remove your finger from the screen, but inviting you to submit yourself to the sea, to be swept along by its tides. It feels like an exhortation, too. As the fragments of the game's narrative drift towards one another, the memories held in the curios scattered across its islands feel ever more like an unreliable crutch; though thoughts of the past can help us escape, they can equally hold us captive.

The ocean you navigate is remarkably calm, the delicate lapping of waves accompanied by the whirring clicks of nautical equipment as you glide effortlessly across the surface, with just a hint of resistance as you draw clear from an island. Point your compass towards a shore and you'll hear the wooden creak of your boat's hull as you physically drag yourself inland. And yet as you negotiate the old, abandoned structures that hold the game's many small secrets, you'll drift through them as if in a mellow reverie.

These are wonderful places to briefly inhabit, perfectly imperfect in their arrangements, with each carrying the quietly haunting intrigue of an afternoon spent sifting through bric-a-brac in an abandoned loft. Rooms, stairwells and corridors are filled with ethereal whispers and chimes, as well as the gorgeous acoustic themes of Jonathan Eng. You'll hear the musical patter of raindrops on window panes, a gull's echoing cry, the hiss and crackle of radio static, and a rum-soaked old voice, weathered by time and tragedy. You may not be a tangible presence in the world, but these places feel lived-in, their ambience lent emotional weight by the history attached to the objects found therein.

Yet the plot is hardly opaque. This isn't a mystery, nor a puzzle to be solved. Rather, the key events of the narrative take shape early on, and are subsequently contextualised and imbued with deeper meaning. It's a tale with a song in its heart and romance in its soul, its wistful, melancholic reminiscences interspersed with a note of bittersweet optimism. Other developers might have opted for a bigger emotional punch as you finally prepare to leave the past behind, but the subtly moving coda here is an exemplar of storytelling maturity.

For some, a bold attempt to bridge the gap between the game world and ours may only serve to emphasise the distance, while the unorthodox structure may irk those who prefer their narratives neatly packaged up. But abandon your expectations of what a game is and how a story should be told, and this lyrical, wilfully elusive experience will stay with you, lingering with the warmth and sorrow of a parting embrace. To give in to its spell, you just need to let go.

9

Until now, Simogo has been known for its stylish – and stylised – 2D visuals, but clever use of depth-of-field effects and parallax scrolling give you the impression of exploring a fully 3D space in *The Sailor's Dream*

Publisher/developer Simogo
Format iOS
Release Out now



A SEA SYMPHONY

In a delightful coincidence, *The Sailor's Dream* is the second game this issue (along with *Fantasia*) that owes a debt to cult DS game *Electroplankton*. Simogo is more than happy to acknowledge the inspiration, though it would be discourteous to detail its influence here. As with *Device 6* and *Year Walk*, we'd advise playing with the volume up and earbuds in, so you can truly appreciate the performance from voice actor R Bruce Elliott and other aural surprises best left unspoiled.







Vanquish

Shinji Mikami's cult sci-fi shooter marked a rocket-powered clash of cultures

By Chris Thursten

Publisher Sega **Developer** PlatinumGames **Format** 360, PS3 **Release** 2010

V*anquish's* beginning could be another game's end. After a giant space station called Providence is taken over by a group of Russian ultranationalists, its microwave ray is used to annihilate San Francisco (as if a microwave ray was ever going to be used for anything else). In a sequence that's notably graphic given the abstracted nature of the game that follows, a red beam causes the blood of everyone in the Bay Area to boil in their veins as, inevitably, the Golden Gate Bridge begins its collapse. Heads explode and windscreens are smeared with viscera; an old man is hit by a car, falls off the bridge, and plummets into the roiling, superheated ocean. Cut to the White House press office as President Elizabeth Winters (a facial and vocal match for Hillary Clinton) vows to send in the marines. From the Moon, apparently.

A fleet of US starships approaches the city-sized Providence from the lunar nearside as the game's villain, Victor Zaitsev, issues his demands: surrender, or New York is next. Zaitsev wears a skintight bodysuit, eyeshadow and lipstick, giving him the bearing of the love child of Vladimir Putin and Robert Smith from The Cure. On board a US carrier, Robert Burns, an eight-foot-tall commanding officer with a mechanical arm, briefs a crew of grunts and introduces protagonist Sam Gideon, who stands nearby in prototype power armour – the unfortunately named ARS, or Augmented Reaction Suit – smoking a cigarette and talking via radio with his DARPA handler, Elena, and mentor, Professor Candide.

Gideon and Burns then have a brief slow-motion knife fight for no discernible reason, there's an enormous battle both inside and outside of the space station, the carrier crash-lands in a loading bay and is immediately set upon by an army of Russian robots, and the player is handed control. *Vanquish* rockets up its own absurdity curve with such velocity that the inevitable response to its intro is a kind of shell shock, an effect only compounded by the steep difficulty of what follows. The first proper battle is a beachfront assault in a curving arena where Gideon and his marine allies take fire from all corners. When the last robot falls, a vast spider tank climbs out of the ground. When they destroy that, it turns into a towering humanoid mech with an eye-mounted laser weapon that can eliminate the player in a single hit. When that finally falls, the game begins in earnest.

This is what happens when the people responsible for *Bayonetta* and *God Hand* decide to try their luck at a western-style cover shooter. Platinum's irreverence and fondness for the absurd is here presented in a new context. *Vanquish*'s plot is pure *Call Of Duty* – scheming separatists, grizzled sergeants, hijacked orbital weapons – but Mikami's team stretches and distorts it at every opportunity. Quotably awful dialogue ("Men, we've got eight hours to stop New York from becoming the next San Francisco!") and oddly literary character names (Gideon, Candide, Robert Burns) provide the sense of something being lost in translation; the confidence with which the game presents its first of many gigantic robots confirms that its developers don't much care either way. *Vanquish* opens with the swagger and delirium at which Platinum has always excelled, and it is a delight to see that lack of respect descend upon a subject matter so frequently po-faced and self-serious as the military shooter.

Vanquish is the product of split influences. Burns and his marines come straight from Aliens, while the interior of Providence takes after *Mass Effect*'s Citadel. The game's American tech looks like it has been lifted from *Halo*, while the Russian robots and their ships are curved and alien. Sam and the ARS suit are purely the product of Japan, however: the suit itself takes after mecha anime, specifically Casshern, and rather than collect individual guns, the player scans in new designs for an elaborate transforming weapon called BLADE. Similarly, the combat merges western-style cover shooting with the pace and high skill ceiling that Platinum is known for, and boss encounters draw extensively from the eastern style guide: transforming robots, glowing weak spots, multistage encounters.

In the hands of western developers, the cover shooter has become emblematic of a design philosophy that values cinematic presentation, believable environments, ▶



Because AR kicks in when you take potentially-lethal damage, you can risk open-air engagements. It's not the best way to use the ability

and a strong sense of the player character's physical embodiment in the world. The defining image of this trend is one of *Gears Of War*'s heavy-set soldiers slumped against a waist-high wall, painstakingly reloading a jammed rifle as the enemy closes in, although you could choose examples from *Max Payne*, recent *GTA*s or *The Last Of Us*. The player is expected to identify with their character and the world to the extent that gameplay becomes an act of roleplay where the fantasy is that of the survivor, the normal person under duress. The verb set of a western cover shooter – crouch, aim, shoot, move – is a means to a cinematic end. Your skill (or absence thereof) is secondary to making you feel like you are there, that the characters around you matter.

Vanquish, however, places player skill at the centre of its interpretation of the cover shooter. Mikami's design infuses game elements into a genre that has displayed diminishing interest in being seen as gamelike, and does so as a complement to a world defined by the absurd and surprising.

Two additions to Gideon's moveset are at the centre of this shift, each enabled by the technology of the ARS. Using a set of thigh-mounted thrusters, our hero can skid along the ground on his knees like a rocket-powered Pete Townshend, gaining incredible momentum at the expense of heat buildup. Powerful melee strikes can be chained out of boosts (briefly overloading Gideon's heatsinks if you choose to use them), but the main purpose of the move is to enable lightning-fast repositioning within each arena. The drama of the western cover shooter comes from the threat of being caught in open ground. *Vanquish* makes play of these moments, asking the player to not simply survive but to decide, quickly and under fire, which dramatic play they are going to make next.

The second key feature is bullet time (here 'AR mode'), accessed by either getting shot or by squeezing the left trigger while dodging or leaping over cover. The duration of the effect is, again, mitigated by heat accumulation, but it's a vital technique, and the only way to dodge certain boss attacks or to survive a dense crossfire. The most crucial thing about AR mode, however, is that it is inaccessible while the player is safe. There is no way to trigger it without taking damage (which means leaving cover), performing a diving roll (which means leaving cover), or jumping over a waist-high obstacle (which means leaving cover). *Vanquish* is a rare example of a cover shooter that is always encouraging you to move. *Gears Of War* might dwell on the image of its beleaguered COG, but here Mikami goes for a more kinetic and over-the-top picture: Gideon with one hand on the cover he has just departed, bringing the BLADE to bear on a squadron of Russian robots in loving slow motion. The game is an energetic rejection of caution, a celebration of movement, action, and player agency.

THE GAME IS AN ENERGETIC REJECTION OF CAUTION, A CELEBRATION OF ACTION, MOVEMENT AND PLAYER AGENCY

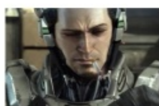




TOP **Rocket-powered sliding forces you to reconsider how to approach every arena.** ABOVE **Like other Platinum titles, the rush of effects makes sense in motion**



Overheating at the wrong time can be fatal, but also breaks the combat's rhythm, forcing you to run away until the suit fixes itself



SMOKING GUN

As much as *Vanquish*'s tone is set by its most dramatic set-pieces – the starship that turns into a tank, slow-motion kung fu with flying battlesuits – the game is full of small details. After destroying one enemy in the third act, Sam attempts to shake the hand of a soldier who salutes him instead, an odd moment of light physical comedy at odds with the spectacle that precedes it. The best example of Platinum's affection for irreverent detail is the smoke break action, bound to a shoulder button, that allows Sam to light up while crouched behind cover. The ostensible reason for its inclusion is that heat-seeking Russian robots might be distracted by your discarded butts, but it's just as effective as a reminder that there is always something more exciting you could be doing when you're sitting in cover.

Vanquish also provides room for degrees of finesse on the player's part, tracked after each encounter on a scoreboard that tallies up your performance on fight-by-fight and campaign-wide levels. The measure for success in a traditional thirdperson shooter is survival, sometimes with lots of ammo. Here it's surviving *stylishly*, and that provides room for player expression not available elsewhere. You can make progress in the campaign by adopting a reactionary playstyle, but a good player sets their own rhythm in a way that mirrors the score-attack brawlers for which Platinum is so renowned. Boosts, AR activations, melee attacks and dips into cover interact with the suit's heat level in a way that creates a game of timing and resource management. A good player is always acting decisively to maintain momentum. At the highest level of play, you do not look at one of *Vanquish*'s arenas and see a field of waist-high walls waiting to be hidden behind, you see a course, a racetrack, a *Rock Band* fretboard: terrain to be mastered.



The irony of *Vanquish* is that it is an antidote to a design trend that its director began. The genesis of *Gears Of War* and *The Last Of Us* is *Resident Evil 4*, a Mikami game that established a close thirdperson view could be used to effectively embody the player in the world. There's something cathartic about seeing the designer address the trends he started. *Vanquish*'s message is that if you're going to do it, do it right. It is resolutely playful in its criticism, celebrating the same images and ideas with which it fiddles and breaks.

It's appropriate, then, that a game with such a spectacular and violent opening should have an inexplicably silly closing moment. After Zaitsev falls and Gideon escapes the exploding station, the player is asked to shoot asteroids in an interactive score-attack credit sequence as the camera plummets towards the Earth. Each asteroid bears a developer's photo, and the final boss of this sequence – and therefore the final encounter – is a star-shaped asteroid with Mikami's grinning face surrounded by a halo of spinning rocks, looming closer and closer until the player pulls the trigger and the final scoreboard is shown. *Vanquish*'s beginning makes you question how seriously its developers would like to be taken. Its ending gives you your answer. ■





JAMES LEACH

Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

The development team calls: "Would you like to pop in and discuss a few things?" I'm doing three projects for them at the moment, so I said I'd be delighted to. Of course, nothing is designed to annoy me more. It's winter, it's rainy, they're 140 miles away and, more than anything, I don't want to leave my home office. Plus it's a day I'm not doing anything for them. Will they tack a day onto my schedule? No. They won't even pay my petrol. Huh. Where are the car keys?

So up I rock to their premises. The first thing they ask about is the cute little RPG I'm writing for. It seems the problem is the race of little characters you meet halfway through.

"We're worried about the leprechauns," they say. There's nothing wrong with the leprechauns. In fact, I'm rather pleased with them. They're feisty and rude, but if you resist their cheekiness, they can aid you in your quest. The idea being that if you take immediate offence and start hacking them about with an axe, they die in their droves and you don't see them again. You won't get the map or the potions they'd supply you with.

"We think the leprechauns are a little offensive," says the team leader. But this is the point, I argue. You absorb that and suddenly they like you and you'll be potioned and mapped up before you know it. This, it turns out, isn't the problem. The leprechauns are, in the team's opinion, offensive to the people of Ireland. I scratch my head at this. They don't speak in Irish accents. The text doesn't reflect their Emerald Isle heritage. They're not even referred to as leprechauns in the game.

"The trouble is they're small and wear green and have hats with belt buckles on the front." This is not my problem – I didn't design them. But it turns out that one of them says, "We'll help you, to be sure." I have to change everything I've written about them. That's the first thing on the agenda. I make a note of it.

Next is the fictional WWII-era fighter plane game I'm also doing. None of the planes look much like real planes, and at no point are schools bombed. But the team don't like the fact that I've used the words "Tally-ho" when you and your wingman attack. This, I explain, is an old hunting term for chasing foxes, save-the-badger patrols and the like.



"It's an English term," they say. True. In my work – and my life – I use quite a few English terms. It's sort of a habit

"It's an English term," they say. This is true. In my work – and, frankly, my life – I use quite a few English terms. It's sort of a habit with me. But it turns out that, as an English term, it might offend Germans. Yep, it's a WWII-style game with planes firing machine guns at each other. God forbid a German, or anyone, might see a couple of old-fashioned words in it as distressing. But I say none of this and draw doodles on my pad as they explain that we must remove "Tally-ho" and ideally introduce a note of regret during attacks, since there's a high chance that some of the enemy might be hurt or emotionally damaged by the conflict.

The last game I'm contracted to write for is a brightly coloured puzzle game. Frankly, it's the best thing they're making at the moment. There's no text for this apart from the brief, cheerful instructions that crop up as soon as it loads. It's a little plate-spinner affair, cleverly set inside a series of fake websites, in which you use little bombs to keep everything in motion. The idea is to place these perfectly to keep everything going as you switch between sites. Oh no. Bombs. It's about the bombs. They hate the bombs. Terrorism. A world on the brink of war.

"Now, the puzzle game," they say. I'm ready for this and I jump in. I tell them that instead of bombs, the explosions could be flowers bursting into bloom. Or balloons popping. Balloons would be good, actually, because when the bombs burst, they fire out a cloud of tiny bits of shrapnel, which do look like glitter. Colourful glitter-filled balloons would be great, as long as the colours aren't those of the flags of a country we're currently in a high state of tension with. Red, white and blue would be my choice. Unless, isn't that the Ukrainian flag colours? Anyway, the text would only require the most minor of tweaks…

"We're not proceeding with the puzzle game," say the boss. "We think the market isn't really in the right place. Plus we've got our hands full with the WWII thing, and the non-leprechaun game." I don't believe a word of it and I tell him so, because I am forthright.

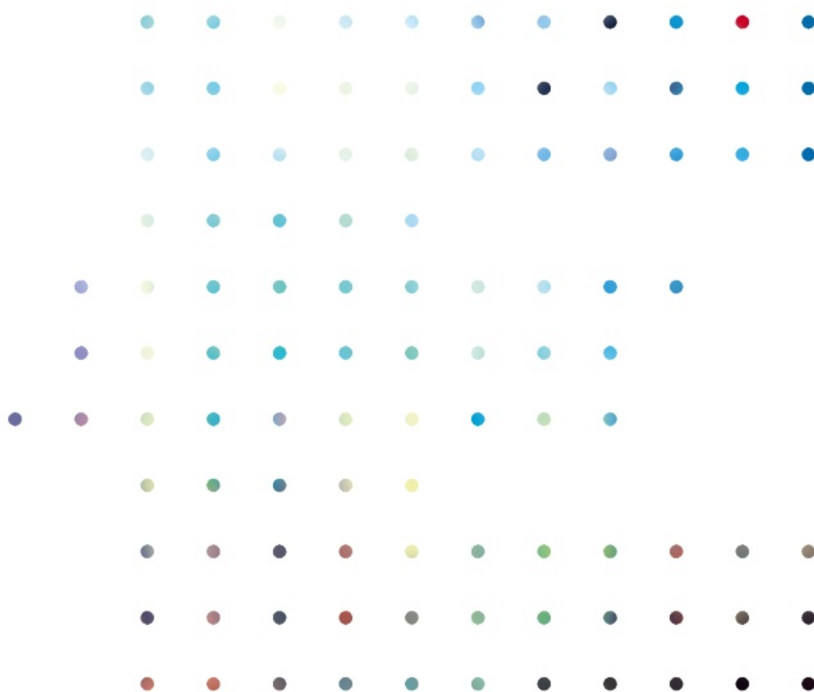
The boss looks sheepish. "OK, we admit it. Some of the websites look, er, familiar. They're sites people might know. The sort of savvy forum-type people who could do us a lot of harm. We're keen not to annoy those guys."

I get it. The Internet is scary. Causing offence is one thing, but you don't ever poke the keyboard army.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer whose work features in games and on television and radio

Illustration **box-kite-curve.com**

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NO STEP
NO STEP
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